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Boundaries shown on this map are those of the Republic of Belarus, and do not include the entire Belarusian ethnic territory parts of which extend into neighboring states.

EDITOR'S DESK

Union Treaty Spells End to Belarusian Statehood

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus declared its independence. Since that time, Western governmental, educational and research institutions have become increasingly interested in the newly independent republic. Now, after three years of plotting by Lukashenka and Yeltsin, Belarus has come full circle and returned to the bosom of Russia. At the end of 1999, the treaty merging Belarus with Russia went into effect. It provides for long-term integration yet promises to preserve the independence and sovereignty of both states.

One nagging question however remains: Given her long history of brutal conquest of neighbors and backflipping on international agreements, can Russia really be trusted to respect the commitment to Belarus' independence? This is after all the country responsible for the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact which led to World War II, and the country now engaged in a violent struggle to maintain power in Chechnya.

In 1994, the US and Great Britain joined Russia as co-signers of the OSCE Budapest memorandum. This document stated that the "United States of America, the Russian Federation and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland reaffirm their commitment to the Republic of Belarus, in accordance with the principles of the CSCE Final Act, to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of the Republic of Belarus."

So much for words, however eloquent. Soon after the signing, Lukashenka and Yeltsin conspired to absorb Belarus into the Russian Federation in such a way as not to alarm the West and inadvertently cut the purse strings of aid which emanated therefrom. Their efforts were not unsuccessful. On December 8, 1999, Boris Yelsin and Alyaksandr Lukashenka signed the Union Treaty of Belarus and Russia. The treaty was ratified in short order by tho Russian Duma (December 13), by Lukashenka's rubber stamp lower house (December 14) and by the upper houses of both parliaments (December 22). Votes in favor of ratification were unanimous in both countries' chambers — and no debates or hearings proved necessary. The West greeted the news with a yawn. Indeed, were it not for Yeltsin's illness — which ostensibly delayed the signing of the union treaty — the world would probably not even have noticed that, in the space of two weeks, an entire country of 10 million had vanished off the map of Europe, once more firmly nestled in the clutches of the Russian bear.

How then should freedom-loving Belarusians now respond? What support can they reasonably count on from the world community in general and Western democracies in particular?

Alas, in our opinion, the West will continue to pay lip service to issues regarding Belarusian sovereignty; its primary concern is hardly Belarus' survival. The West is concerned first and foremost with protecting its financial investment in Russia, and ensuring that Moscow does not rattle its nuclear weapons. The attention of Washington, for example, is also focused elsewhere - specifically on the Middle East, where it expends huge amounts of time, energy and money just to keep the Israelis and Arabs from killing each other.

With Yeltsin now gone and Putin in power, the rules of the "union game" may also suddenly change. Lukashenka used to exploit Yeltsin's feelings of guilt over his role in the breakup of the Soviet Union; the renewed union was a mechanism through which the Russian president could atone for his sins. The pragmatic Putin, of course, bears no such guilt, and such maneuvering on Lukashenka's part will no longer be effective. Indeed, on January 2, Putin made clear his intent to play hard ball with other former Soviet republics. The new president is far more likely to look at the bottom line with respect to Belarus and seek the most advantageous solution for Russia. He will probably shuck the whole idea of a union of two sovereign states and push for the full integration of Belarus as a province of Russia, thereby reducing the size of Russian subsidies to Belarus. This, of course, means that the most Lukashenka can hope for in terms of personal power is to become the governor of such a province; given such a scenario, all his alleged aspirations for the Kremlin throne will be hopelessly dashed.

It would have been much cheaper and much easier for the West to have prevented the merger in the first place; undoing it now will doubtless prove costly, both in political and financial terms. It is unfortunate, for instance, that briefings were discontinued in 1997 between members of the Belarusian diaspora in the U.S. and State Department representatives. Valuable information heretofore imparted to the State Department's Ambassador-at-Large on developments in Belarus was discontinued following changes in the Ambassador-at-Large position.

Unless the Russia-Belarus union self-destructs in the way the Soviet Union did, the process of regaining independence for Belarus will no doubt be very long and arduous. Hopefully, it can be accomplished peacefully, as Belarusians are a peace-loving nation. As things stand now, the new union has yet to be christened with a name. Gorbachev, perhaps only coincidentally, suggested a moniker whose acronym has a curiously familiar ring — "Union of Socialist Sovereign Republics." Is the world ready for the new USSR?

Subscription Renewal

We are entering the 21st century and the 3rd millennium. With this issue we will be completing eleven years of BR publication. We are proud to say that with your help we have been able to keep the Review's mission of informing the world about Belarus on track. Now is the time to renew your subscription for the year 2000. We have been trying not to raise the subscription fee for the last four years. But the cost of production and mailing have been going up. To catch up with higher costs, the new subscription rate is being raised by $5, making it $45 for individuals and $65 for institutions. For countries outside North America, an additional fee of $15 is required. Of course, your donations would be greatly appreciated. For more information on renewal, please see the bottom of the last page..

Acknowledgments

At this time of year, we would like once again to thank our readers for their interest in our publication and their loyal support expressed in a variety of ways: verbal encouragement, subscriptions, gift subscriptions, and individual donations. Special thanks go to all of those who gave their time generously to write articles for BR, gave permission to reprint their articles free of charge, help with edit/proofreading, and send materials of interest to BR.

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WE WISH ALL OUR READERS A HAPPY AND PROSPEROUS NEW YEAR!

Joe Price, Editor

FEATURES

U.S. Lawmakers Concerned over Situation in Belarus

The leadership of the Congressional Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and a group of Senators and House Representatives (including Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and Jesse Helms, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee), in their October 15 letter to Secretary Madeleine Albright, voiced concern over violations of the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Belarus. Following is the text of the letter:

Dear Madam Secretary:

We are writing to voice our growing concern over violations of the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Belarus under the authoritarian leadership of Aleksandr Lukashenka, who remains in power despite the expiration of his legal presidential mandate last July. The fledgling opposition in Belarus deserves both our moral and material support as they seek to overcome the legacy of Communism and authoritarianism and build a democratic society firmly rooted in the rule of law.

Many of us recently had an opportunity to meet with Anatoly Lebedko of the United Civic Party of Belarus, a young political leader who, despite personal risk, continues to openly criticize the Lukashenka regime. His personal safety is of particular concern as he returns to Belarus following an intense crackdown against the opposition.

In recent weeks, Lukashenka has reportedly authorized a series of measures designed to further suppress Belarus' already beleaguered opposition. Border controls have apparently been tightened and officials in Miensk and other large cities have been instructed to ban public protests and demonstrations. The few remaining independent opposition newspapers, including Naviny and Kuryer, have likewise come under increased pressure from the authorities.

Lukashenka's campaign of harassment and intimidation of the political opposition has intensified. Former Premier Mikhail Chigir, arrested in March on politically-motivated charges, remains imprisoned. A number of other former government officials and political opposition figures continue to be subjected to lengthy pre-trial detention on similar changes. In a particularly disturbing development, several prominent opposition leaders, including Viktor Gonchar, Tamara Vinnikova, and Yuri Zakharenka, have simply disappeared.

Madam Secretary, we urge you to intensify pressure on the Lukashenka regime for the immediate release of all political detainees in Belarus and a full accounting of those who have disappeared. We further urge you to ensure that adequate resources are made available on an urgent basis to support those programs aimed at strengthening independent media, human rights, civil society, independent trade unions and the democratic opposition in Belarus.

(Signed) Christopher H. Smith (M.C.), Chairman; Ben Nighthorse Campbell (U.S.S.), Co-Chairman; Steny H. Hoyer (M.C.), House Ranking Member; Trent Lott, U.S.S.; William V. Roth, Jr., U.S.S; Kay Bailey Hutchison,U.S.S.; Benjamin L. Cardin, M.C.; Frank R. Wolf, M.C.; Alcee L. Hastings, M.C.; Jesse Helms, U.S.S.

cc: Brady Anderson, Administrator, Agency for International Development; Stephen R. Sestanovich, Ambassador-at-Large and Special Advisor to the Secretary for the Newly Independent States; Charles B. Taylor, Coordinator of U.S. Assistance to the New Independent States

U.S. Department of State Condemns Violent Supression of Freedom March in Miensk

Following is the text of the October 18 statement by James B. Foley, Department of State Deputy Spokesman

BELARUS: GOVERNMENT ATTACKS PEACEFUL MARCH

Violent suppression by Belarusian authorities of the opposition-organized "Freedom March" in Minsk on October 17 represents another violation by Belarus of its OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] commitments and is a further demonstration of the constitutional and political crisis that exists in that country. Drawing over 20,000 Belarusians of all ages, the march was the largest demonstration seen in Minsk in more than three years. Violence erupted when a contingent of about 5,000 demonstrators tried peacefully to enter central Minsk. Dozens of people were beaten and arrested by Belarusian police, and there are reports of revenge beatings by security forces of some of these who were held overnight.

The United States Government calls on Belarus to respect its international obligations and to investigate the behavior of its security forces yesterday and last night. We also urge the immediate release of political detainees, including opposition leader Nikolai Statkevich and journalist Maksim Malinovsky, who were arrested yesterday. The U.S. remains concerned about other recent disappearances and the continued suppression of independent media.

CSCE Voicing Its Concerns in a Letter to Lukashenka

Following is the text of the October 19, 1999, letter sent Mr. Lukashenka by the US Congressional Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission)., expresing the Commission's growing concern about violations of human rights, democracy and rule of law in Belarus.

Dear President Lukashenka:

We are writing to express our serious and growing concerns about recent developments in Belarus. Until recently, we were becoming more hopeful that meaningful dialogue between the Belarusian Government and opposition would take place. Within the last month, however, violations of the principles of human rights, democracy and rule of law have come to our attention that, frankly, lead us to question your government's seriousness in finding a solution to the problems of democracy in Belarus. We were disturbed to learn of the arrest earlier today of democratic opposition leader Anatoly Lebedko, for allegedly participating in "an unsanctioned march."

Our concerns include the following:

* the continued imprisonment of former Prime Minister Mikhail Chygir, who was supposed to be released from investigative detention where he has been held for six months.
* the disappearances of former Central Election Commission Chairman Viktor Gonchar, his colleague Yuri Krasovsky, former Interior Minister Yuri Zakharenka, and former National Bank Chair Tamara Vinnikova.
* increased attempts to stifle freedom of expression, including the annulling of registration certificates of nine periodicals, and especially the harassment of *Naviny* through the use of high libel fees clearly designed to silence this independent newspaper.
* the denial of registration of non-governmental organizations, including the Belarusian Independent Industrial Trade Union Association.
* the police raid, without a search warrant, on the human rights organization Viasna-96, and confiscation of computers which stored data on human rights violations.
* criminal charges against opposition activist Mikola Statkevich and lawyer Oleg Volchek and continued interrogation of lawyer Vera Stremkovskaya.
* the initial attack by riot police against peaceful protestors in last Sunday's Freedom March.

Your efforts to address these concerns would reduce the climate of suspicion and fear that currently exists and enhance confidence in the negotiation process which we believe is so vital to Belarus' development as a democratic country in which human rights and the rule of law are respected.

Signed: Christopher H. Smith (M.C.), Chairman; Ben Nighthorse C ampbell (U.S.S), Co-Chairman; Steny H. Hoyer (M.C.) and Frank R. Lautenberg U.S.S), Ranking Members

ILHR Protests Crackdown on March Organizers in Belarus

Some 20,000 people took part In an opposition freedom march and rally in Minsk on October 17, 1999. The anti-government demonstration was the largest one since spring 1996. Demonstrators urged President Lukashenka to resign and demanded that the authorities cease pursuing a union with Russia, stop repression against the opposition and release political prisoners. Fighting broke out between police and demonstrators, leading to arrests and injuries. According to some reports, over 100 demostrators were injured in the clashes, including scores of policemen.

Following is the text of the October 25 letter sent Mr. Lukashenka by the New York-based International League of Human Rights, expressing its concern about the Belarusian authorities crackdown on the organizers and participants in the October 17 Freedom March in Minsk

Dear Mr. Lukashenko,

The International League for Human Rights, an international, non-governmental organization with consultative status at the United Nations, is greatly concerned about the Belarusian authorities crackdown on the organizers and participants in the October 17 Freedom March.

In our view, the origin of the conflict and ensuing violence was the authorities' refusal to allow the march take place as requested, at a venue where demonstrators could have rallied peacefully and delivered their urgent message to your government, regarding the intolerable human rights situation in Belarus. The League always condemns violence used by states to attack peaceful demonstrators seeking redress of grievances. The League never condones violent acts by demonstrators. Yet we do note that according to Russian television footage and eyewitness reports, riot police first attacked demonstrators who marched beyond the approved route, beating them with truncheons, causing some participants (a small minority of the total number of those who marched) to respond by throwing rocks.

According to media and human rights organization reports, since October 17, approximately 200 people have been arrested, fined or jailed on administrative and, in a few cases, criminal charges. We have also been receiving numerous reports of serious mistreatment of detainees by law enforcement officials during arrests and interrogations, including beatings and cruel treatment. Also in violation of international norms, trials have been conducted hastily and without adequate opportunities for the defendants to defend themselves and obtain access to counsel. We would like to highlight just a few of the many cases that have come to our attention.

* On October 18, a criminal action was brought against Nikolai Statkevich, the leader of the Belarusian Social Democrats Party. Statkevich has been charged under Article 183 of the Belarusian Criminal Code with "organizing mass disturbances." His case was joined to a previous one, recently relaunched against Statkevich in connection with his involvement in a July 27 demonstration. Statkevich, who has been banned from leaving Minsk, is currently in a pre-trial detention center, where he has declared a hunger strike as a sign of protest against the arbitrariness of the authorities and police during the Freedom March.

* On October 18, Ludmila Gryaznova, 13th Supreme Soviet deputy and a member of Charter 97's board of directors, was fined 300 million rubles (approximately US$500) by the Sovietsky District Court according to Article 167 of the Administrative Code for organizing and participating in an unsanctioned rally. The court hearing lasted for just an hour and a half.

* On October 18 at midnight, police visited the home of Valery Schukin, a deputy of the 13th Supreme Soviet, and handed him a subpoena to appear in court on October 19, at 4 p.m. Early in the morning on the following day policemen were waiting for him near his office in order to bring him to the courthouse. Apparently, they feared he might flee. Like Statkevich, Schukin faces criminal charges of "organizing and active participation in mass activities which violate public order," a charge which carries a prison term of up to 3 years. On October 19, while detained in the Sovietsky District Police Station, Schukin was severely beaten.

* On October 19, Boris Gunter, a member of the Belarusian Popular Front and one of the initiators of the Freedom March, was arrested in Minsk. Prior to this, police came to his home, but Gunter refused to open the door. He was detained on October 19 at the headquarters of the Belarusian Popular Front, which police immediately searched. Gunter was subsequently sentenced to 15 days of jail.

* On October 19 at 5 a.m., law enforcement officers attempted to break into the home of Pavel Zhuk, Naviny editor-in chief. Zhuk was not home at the time, but they interrogated his son as to his whereabouts. Again on October 22, police attempted to apprehend Zhuk.

* On October 19, Yevgeny Afnagel, a member of the Youth Front and one of the initiators of the Freedom March, was sentenced to 15 days imprisonment. During the court proceedings, Afnagel stressed that as soon as he learned of the ban placed on the march, he immediately refused to continue to be an organizer of the action. Nor did he participate in the rally. However, Judge Inna Sheiko of the Sovietsky District Court still found him guilty of organizing and participating in an unsanctioned demonstration.

* On October 20, Anatoly Lebedko, a deputy of the 13th Supreme Soviet and one of the organizers of the Freedom March, was sentenced by the Sovietsky District Court in Minsk to 10 days of administrative detention. Lebedko pleaded not guilty to the charges of organizing an unsanctioned demonstration.

The League has several other major concerns more generally related to the increasingly repressive conditions in Belarus:

* On October 8, Judge Vera Tupik turned down the request of Andrei Klimov, deputy of 13th Supreme Soviet who has been in detention since February 11, 1998 to be released during his trial. The petition was handed over by Klimov's attorney Gary Pogonyailo, deputy chair of the Belarus Helsinki Committee. Pogonyailo reminded the judge about the Belarus's commitments to human rights and international standards of treatment in detention. Commenting on the refusal, Judge Tupik referred to Klimov as a criminal and explained that there were sufficient grounds to keep him in custody.

* The following organizations are just a few of those that have been groundlessly refused re-registration: the Belarusian Association of Young Politicians, Viasna-96 Center for Protection of Human Rights, Soligorsk Club of Voters, the Philon Kmita Orsha Center, the Center for Public Initiatives Inter-regional Association (Molodechno), the Kalinovsky Brothers Association (Svisloch). Even for those NGOs that did manage to obtain re-registration, the process was far from straightforward: the re-registration of the majority of NGO-members was groundlessly delayed and in many cases additional procedures not envisaged by law and in defiance of international norms were added. According to our sources, less than 1500 NGOs have been re-registered, nearly half the number which existed prior to the government's unnecessary re-registration campaign. This deals a serious blow to the development of civil society in Belarus which even prior to the re-registration had been lagging far behind most other post-Soviet countries.

The League calls on you to take the following steps to address the egregious human rights abuses mentioned above:

1) Release all those who have been detained as a result of their role in the organization and participation in the Freedom March and revoke any fines or other punishments that have been issued for the same reasons.

2) Conduct an open and transparent investigation into the causes of violence during the Freedom March. This investigation should include a review of the possible role of law enforcement officials, both uniformed and plainclothes, in provoking the violence, as well as their possible excessive use of force in the detentions which followed the March.

3) Release Mr. Klimov from custody while his trial is in session, as he is not charged with a grave or violent offense, and take steps to assure that the proceedings are open and impartial and that he receives access to counsel of his choice

4) Register those NGOs mentioned above which have been denied re-registration on unlawful grounds.

(Signed) Catherine Fitzpatrick Executive Director International League for Human Rights

OSCE Chairman -in-Office Issues Statement on Belarus

Following is the text of a statement by the Chairman-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, issued December 2, 1999.

OSLO, December 2, 1999 --The Chairman-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Foreign Minister Knut Vollebaek of Norway, welcomes the release of Mikhail Chigir, former Prime Minister of Belarus, from pretrial detention. He trusts that the investigations against Mr. Chigir will now be discontinued, and insists on open proceedings should the case go to court after all.

The Chairman-in-Office encourages the Government of Belarus to speedily implement other confidence-building

measures, in particular providing access by the opposition to state-controlled media. This would certainly facilitate the planned negotiations between the Government and the opposition called for in the Istanbul Summit Declaration. The negotiations will establish legislation to ensure free, fair and internationally accepted parliamentary elections in 2000 as a means to overcome the constitutional controversy in Belarus. The Chairman-in-Office recognizes the release of Mr. Chigir as a promising indication of the readiness of the Government of Belarus to initiate a genuine transformation of Belarus towards a pluralistic democracy guided by the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Beating of a Parliamentary Deputy

Following is the text of a December 21, 1999, statement by Department of State Deputy Spokesman James B. Foley.

Belarus: Beating of Parliamentary Deputy Andrei Klimov

The December 13 beating of Andrei Klimov, a member of the Belarusian 13th Supreme Soviet, signals a deepening of the political crisis in Belarus and of that country's self-imposed isolation from the Euro-Atlantic democratic community. Deputy Klimov was beaten by guards at the detention center in Minsk where he has been held since February 1998 on politically motivated charges. The Belarusian Government has yet to take steps to investigate the incident and discipline those responsible.

The U.S. Government urges the authorities in Belarus to release Deputy Klimov as well as all other political detainees and prisoners. We also urge that the politically motivated charges against former Prime Minister Mikhail Chigir be dropped and that the government account for those who have disappeared. These steps are among those that will create a climate in which OSCE-sponsored talks on ending the country's constitutional and political crisis can proceed.

THOUGHTS and OBSERVATIONS

An Ominous Accord

By Paul Goble

A new "union treaty" signed on December 8 by Belarus and the Russian Federation threatens the prospects for democracy in both countries, stability across the post-Soviet region, and relations between Moscow and the West.

The agreement, sought since 1996 by Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, allows each country to retain its sovereignty. But it calls for the establishment of a confederal government consisting of a supranational Supreme State Council and having a common currency, tax, and customs and border procedures. While the two sides continue to disagree on the scope and speed of integration, there appears in both Minsk and Moscow to be more willingness now than at any time in the past to pursue the new union treaty. And that in turn suggests the new union could take on a life of its own even if not all its provisions are implemented.

On the one hand, both Belarusians and Russians are likely to continue to struggle over the possibility of any integration of their two countries, a fight that is increasingly likely to define politics in these two countries. And on the other, leaders in other post-Soviet states as well as in the West seem certain to have to deal with the implications of this first step toward the tighter reintegration of some or all of the 12 former Soviet republics.

Regardless of how that debate develops over the coming months, three things are already evident. First, this union accord in itself undermines the prospects for democracy in both Belarus and the Russian Federation. Not only is Yeltsin likely to use it to keep himself in office beyond the year 2000, but the increasing authoritarianism of Belarus seems certain to spread eastward, a development that concerns at least some Russians.

Stanislau Shushkevich, the former chairman of the Belarusian parliament, said recently that Russia is the "main guilty party" for the difficulties facing Belarus at present. Shushkevich says Russia's "imperial way of thinking" has united practically all political parties. And he says its drive for integration with Belarus has enabled Belarusian authorities to "fool the voters."

Even more, the drive for reintegration has prompted Moscow to defend Lukashenka's authoritarian actions. For example, Russia's human rights commissioner, Oleg Mironov, visited Minsk recently to contest Western findings of massive violations of human and civil rights in that country. Mironov said his visit was intended to "dispel the myth" that Belarus violates human rights. He failed to acknowledge the Lukashenka regime's use of force to disperse anti-regime demonstrations, the disappearance of several leading opposition figures, and the regime's denouncement of Western institutions for criticizing what Minsk is doing.

As it defends Belarusian behavior against the West, Moscow will find it ever easier to sanction such behavior at home, particularly in the context of its own massive violation of human rights in the Chechen war and the Western criticism it has received for such violations. Second, the new union treaty in itself destabilizes the post-Soviet region. This pact is openly revisionist in its treatment of the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, suggesting, as both Lukashenka and some Russian leaders have argued, that other former Soviet republics should join either a Slavic Union or something even broader.

Some leaders may be attracted to this idea, others may be repelled, but all are certain to adjust their policies in response to this new treaty. That is especially true if Western governments take the position that this accord could be ratified "democratically." Up to now, Western countries have said that is a requirement, but they have not made clear how such a poll could take place under Lukashenka's rule.

But there is another way in which this accord might destabilize the region. Several Russian analysts have already suggested that some regions within Russia--including Tatarstan — might ask to join the new union in order to get out from under Moscow's tutelage and boost their own status. Such a move could further threaten the integrity of the Russian Federation itself and would certainly elicit a sharp response from Moscow.

And third, not only the ways in which this accord will reduce the prospects for democracy in both Belarus and the Russian Federation but also the likelihood that it will exacerbate tensions across the former Soviet space, which almost certainly will contribute to increasing tensions between Moscow and the West — tensions that as a result of Moscow's campaign in Chechnya already are higher than at any point since the collapse of the USSR.

Consequently, this latest Lukashenka-Yeltsin agreement, even if it is never fully implemented, may mark a turning point in the history of the entire international system. That may be what the two signatories want, but it is certainly something that many others, including a large number of Belarusians and Russians, clearly fear. (RFE/RL Newsline, December 9, 1999)

Paul Goble is the publisher of the RFE/RF Newsline.. Reprinted by permission of Paul Goble.

Belarus at the Crossroads

OSCE Summit urges negotiations between government and opposition on free and fair elections

By Dr. Hans-Georg Wieck

On November 19, 1999, the 54 heads of State or Government of the Member States of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe adopted the Istanbul Summit Declaration. In this important document, the statesmen expressed strong support for the work of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus (paragraph 22 of the Summit Declaration), which has "worked closely with the Belarusian authorities as well as with opposition parties and leaders and non-governmental organizations in promoting democratic institutions and compliance with OSCE commitments, thus facilitating a peaceful resolution of the constitutional controversy." The summit conference further emphasized that "only real political dialogue in Belarus can pave the way for free and democratic elections, through which the foundations for real democracy can be developed." The statement also argues "for early progress in this political dialogue with OSCE participation, in close cooperation with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly." Finally, the statesmen who assembled in Istanbul stressed "the necessity of removing all remaining obstacles to this dialogue by respecting the principles of the rule of law and the freedom of media." They put particular emphasis on the need for confidence-building measures. Among such measures would be the release of citizens prosecuted in court for political motives, and opposition access to state-run media.

The strongly-worded declaration by the leading statesmen of the world finally settled a long standing debate within Belarus itself and in the political arenas of several important member states of the OSCE. This debate centered around whether democracy should be re-established in Belarus by international isolation or instead by dialogue, under OSCE aegis, between the opposing political camps in Belarus. The resolution of a political conflict by peaceful means - in essence, by negotiations under appropriate conditions - constitutes the most important tool and work method of the OSCE. This inter-governmental body in and for Europe is a "regional organization" (as defined in Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations) entitled to settle international issues by peaceful means. The OSCE can be successful in Belarus only when it enjoys the strong and persistent support of member states, and approaches its goal using a variety of methods. One of the ways it endeavors to reach its goal is by outreach - not only to the grass roots and emerging civic society, but also to the center of power in this Soviet successor state.

Many Belarusian politicians and functionaries remain very soviet-minded; therefore, the concept of peaceful settlement of conflict by means of compromise is often opposed. Instead, the prevailing attitude is that conflicts are more easily resolved by power struggle or conspiracy, military force or revolution - methods all too familiar from communist textbooks.

Such is the challenge faced by the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus when it tries to initiate meaningful negotiations on acceptable terms between the government and the opposition. These negotiations are crucial in order to hold free, fair and internationally recognized parliamentary elections as a first step towards building a democracy which would meet European standards. Many people in Belarus, foremost among them youth, share these aspirations of the OSCE. Some opposition forces, however, only with great reluctance adopted the OSCE concept for the settlement of the constitutional controversy - and its early success is by no means assured. Clearly, however, the policy of external isolation and total confrontation stands no chance of achieving its goals, since the Russian Federation is unsupportive of such a policy, and Russia can and does fill the political and economic vacuum created in Belarus by the West's absence.

The recently concluded third Union Treaty between the Russian Federation and Belarus in just one other step in this direction. Belarus is dependent on Russian direct and indirect subsidies, and offers Russia a great deal of freedom of manoeuvre in security matters. Efforts to maintain the country's independence may however carry the day if supporters of this cause find allies in human rights activists and those who defend democractic values.

In 1998/99, the Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus organized a number of conferences dealing with "Free and Fair Elections," "Freedom of Speech without Fear," and "Market Economy, Social Security and Pluralistic Democracy." As a consequence of these presentations, the Advisory and Monitoring Group and the Belarus ad hoc Working Group of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (the latter unanimously adopted a corresponding resolution at its annual session in St. Petersburg on July 10, 1999) initiated an attempt to bring about a substantive political dialogue between the government and the opposition. Their efforts were successful. Subsequent to an informal meeting of representatives of opposition parties (including members of the 13th Supreme Soviet), non-governmental organizations, trade unions and research institutes (think tanks), President Lukashenka agreed to such negotiations. He personally stated as much during a meeting with Mr. Adrian Severin, Chairman of the Belarus ad hoc Working Group of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and Ambassador Dr. Hans-Georg Wieck, Head of the Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus. (Actually, several weeks earlier, Lukashenka had already taken the initiative to substantially improve Belarus' relations with the West, primarily for economic reasons.)

Both sides agreed to conduct (under OSCE aegis, and with the participation of non-governmental organizations in an advisory capacity) negotiations on free and fair parliamentary elections in the year 2000. In order to achieve this, an agenda was adopted. It included such issues as the election law and supplementary regulations, access to state-run media, and functions of the future parliament. After consulting with the opposition, the Advisory and Monitoring Group identified those confidence building measures which the government might implement in order to create a political climate favorable to such negotiations. One such measure, for example, was the release of persons who were either administratively or juridically prosecuted for political reasons; another was allowing the opposition access to state-controlled media prior to the beginning of negotiations.

Some progress was achieved. Although legal prosecution continued, Chigir was set free. Some agreement on media access was reached, but then suspended again. Mr. Sasonov, the chairman of the government delegation to the negotiations, resigned - complaining that in addition to his health being poor, he had encountered too much opposition to the agreed-upon document from within the presidential and governmental apparatus.

A new initiative is to be taken to get the negotiations under way. In the meantime, both sides, in consultation with the Advisory and Monitoring Group, are preparing their positions on the election law projects. The substance of the negotiations to come must yet be tackled; it is still too early to say whether they will be brought to a successful conclusion.

Ambassador Hans-Georg Wieck is head of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus.

BELARUS: The Year 1999 and Prospects for 2000

By David R. Marples

The year was marked by conflict between the government of President Alyaksander Lukashenka and the opposition, and within the major opposition party, the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF). In addition, Lukashenka signed a long delayed Union Treaty with Russia on 8 December to form a confederate state, though at present, this merger is some distance from a full-fledged union.

The first major event of the year was the convocation of the Council of Democratic Forces in Minsk to try to form a united front against the government. One consequence of this Council was the decision to hold an unofficial presidential election on 16 May 1999, five years after the election of Lukashenka, but prior to the expiry of Lukashenko's original mandate (20 July 1999). Of the two candidates for this election, the then BPF leader Zyanon Paznyak remained in exile in Poland; and the former premier Mikhail Chyhir was arrested on 30 March and remained in jail after the expiry of his 3-month sentence.

Viktar Hanchar, deputy chairman of the former Parliament (13th session), who served as chairman of the election committee, declared that the turnout was over 50%, but few believed these figures. Paznyak withdrew from the campaign on 10 May, objecting to the pre-election voting procedures. Lukashenka at first adopted a passive approach to the election, but took a firm stand against NATO's attack on Yugoslavia and his personal visit to Belgrade to meet with Slobodan Milosevic on 14-15 April restored his popularity. The results of the election were never published and ultimately inconsequential.

The Lukashenka government carried out some serious violations of human rights in 1999. A leading opposition newspaper, Naviny, was forced to close in September. Several anti-government leaders "disappeared": Tamara Vinnikava, former chair of the National Bank on 17 April; General Yuri Zakharenka, former Minister of Internal Affairs on 17 May; and Hanchar and Anatol Krasouski, on 16-17 September. The latter event, a suspected kidnapping, came during a "dialogue" between the government and the opposition, being held under the auspices of the OSCE, and initiated by OSCE leader Adrian Severin.

According to the 1994 Constitution, now drastically amended by the government, Lukashenka's term ended on 20 July. Consequently, the opposition proclaimed the Chair of the 13th Parliament, Syamon Sharetsky, as president. Sharetsky believed that he was about to be arrested, and after taking refuge in the headquarters of the OSCE Monitoring Group in Minsk, he fled to Vilnius, and received the protection of the Lithuanian authorities. He then declared his intention to form a government-in-exile, but did not receive any evidence that the international community would recognize such a government.

At the BPF Congress in late July, the leadership contest between Paznyak and Vintsuk Vyachorka ended up an almost even split. Paznyak announced his intention to form a conservative political party, but the move was rejected by a follow-up Congress in late October. The latter also elected Vyachorka as leader, thus ending a decade of leadership by Paznyak.

Belarus's living standards have continued to decline, despite official figures that report a significant level of industrial growth. Real wages are around $40 per month and pensions $15. The black market rate for exchange of the ruble had risen to 700,000 to the dollar by the autumn. One of the worst harvests in memory forced the government to import around 1.6 million tons of grain.

Finally, after several angry statements by Lukashenka that the Russians were not serious about an act of union, and a delay of the signing because of President Yeltsin's illness, the two presidents finally met on 8 December. The new Union is the fourth Russia Belarus structure to be established in the post-Soviet era. It anticipates the formation of a Higher Council that will include the respective presidents, prime ministers, parliamentary chairmen, and legislatures to coordinate policy, but it does not suggest that either country will see a reduction of its sovereignty.

Perspectives for 2000

During the negotiations with the OSCE, President Lukashenka agreed to hold parliamentary elections in 2000 and a presidential election in 2001. This agreement represents a diplomatic triumph for Lukashenka in that a presidential election in 2001 represents implicit recognition of the changes he has made to the 1994 Constitution. The parliamentary election, on the other hand, will lead to some significant wrangling between the government and the opposition. Will the new parliament be a 260-seat body like the first parliament of Belarus, or a powerless 120-seat rump parliament like the one that has existed since late 1996. What will happen to the upper assembly, the Council of the Republic once a new parliament has been elected?

More important, there are few institutions in place that can guarantee an impartial election. Despite promises made to the OSCE by presidential representative Mikhail Sazanau, the opposition has yet to receive an allotted time slot on national television, or a column in the two government daily newspapers, Sovetskaya Belorussiya and Narodnaya hazeta. Only five opposition newspapers survive and their editors are frequently subjected to harassment and intimidation.

In 1999, all political parties and groups were obliged to be re-registered with the government, which has demanded that titles such as Belarusian, national, or popular should be omitted from their names before they can be allowed to continue their existence. If this demand were followed through, virtually all opposition parties other than the United Civic Party would cease to exist. The government decree also affects NGOs. Much will depend on how far the government is prepared to respond to those international institutions and organizations that remain in Minsk and put pressure on the government to retain a pluralistic society, particularly the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group, the United Nations office, and the US and German Embassies.

Can the opposition have a significant impact in the elections and on government policy? There seem to be insufficient unifying factors in place. The BPF will remain on the fringes of political life, although under Vyachorka there will arguably be more opportunities to reach a compromise with other parties than under Paznyak. Vyachorka is a young intellectual with a broad knowledge of international affairs, whose outlook is considerably more moderate than that of his predecessor. Moreover, the fact that he is operating from Minsk, rather than abroad (like Paznyak) is a major advantage. Vyachorka's task, however, will be to convince Belarusians that the BPF is something more than a partisan nationalist group committed only to severing all links with the Russian Federation.

Of the other political parties, the United Civic Party and Social Democratic Party are the most active in their commitment to the process of dialogue begun last summer. The temptation to withdraw from the dialogue in protest at government recalcitrance (a position taken by the former Belarusian leader Stanislau Shushkevich, for example) will remain strong. A key figure may be Myacheslau Hryb, former chairman of the parliament of the 12th session. With Sharetsky and Hanchar evidently removed from the political scene, Hryb is one of the few politicians amenable to both sides and thus essential to the success of the dialogue.

Lukashenka will face significant pressures in 2000. The expansion of NATO and the European Union to the western border of Belarus, and the demands of the Baltic republics to join the former in the near future will leave Belarus very dependent on its friendship with an unpredictable Russian neighbor. Yet a real Union with Russia no longer receives the support it once did. Belarusians are very anxious that a Union does not commit their sons to fight alongside the Russians in Chechnya, for example; and others are wary of alienating NATO and supporting ideologues such as Milosevich of Yugoslavia. A recent poll suggested that of all the countries of the world in which it might be preferable to live, Germany ranked first, far above Russia (not to mention Belarus itself) in the eyes of the public of Belarus.

In addition, the liaison with Russia will bring little relief to the drop in living standards since the autumn of 1998. Belarusians are increasingly cynical about the constant official propaganda about the successes of the economy when a majority is reduced to subsistence level. The government must attend in particular to problems in agriculture. The collective farm structure has been retained (and even praised by the government) but if there is to be an economic improvement, then the authorities must start to dismantle this obsolete system. The same applies to the business climate in Belarus: the government has to take steps to encourage foreign investment, which by 1999 was about one-fifth the level of 1992.

Will Lukashenka continue the dialogue with the opposition? The likelihood is that the Belarusian president will eventually withdraw from this process because it will force him ultimately to relinquish some of the authority he has built up over the past five years. In the short term he will continue to offer lip service to the dialogue, using delaying tactics and offering minor concessions (such as the freeing of political prisoners as occurred with Chyhir late in 1999) without any real commitment to political reforms. Whether the dialogue continues will ultimately depend on the OSCE AMG (and the German government, which is by far the most influential of the Western powers both in this organization and in Belarus generally) rather than the Belarusian government. The latter can drag the talks on indefinitely without weakening its position.

In foreign policy, Belarus will likely increase its distance from NATO, and groups such as the IMF. The president would prefer to be the linchpin of a new international grouping that would form a symbolic counterpoint to NATO, which Lukashenka perceives as the major threat to the security of his country. Ideally this grouping would include not only Russia and Belarus, but also Ukraine (though Kuchma is opposed, parliamentary leader Tkachenko is strongly in favor of Ukraine joining the Russian Belarus Union), in addition to Yugoslavia and some countries of the Middle East and Far East.

As in the past, relations with Russia remain critical. Lukashenka has no firm allies among the leadership candidates for president of Russia, but he has in the past indicated that he could work with Luzhkov or Primakov. Lukashenka himself, as has often been rumored, may himself take part in the Russian presidential elections of 2000, but despite assiduous courting of Russia's more hard-line provincial governors, it is highly unlikely that such a campaign would be successful. Without the certainty of success, Lukashenka would not endanger his current position by running in the Russian election, unless it could be done through the machinery of the Russia-Belarus Union.

In 2000, Lukashenka's position as president is unlikely to be threatened seriously, despite the fact that few countries now recognize him as the legitimate president. The KGB and the police will maintain their authority and all-pervasive presence. The foreign contingent in Belarus will continue to deal with the de facto president, particularly given the dissensions within the opposition and the manifest lack of a suitable candidate to offer a legitimate challenge to Lukashenka. However, the president's popularity will continue to dwindle (rather than plummet), the economy will remain in a deep slump with the real purchasing power of wages reduced further, and his options will be increasingly limited: to reach further accommodation with Russia while maintaining a distance from, but without alienating completely, the countries of the West.

(This article first appeared in Oxford Analytica.*)*

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BELARUS' FORUM

Popular Front Seals Split

Following an inconclusive vote on electing a new leader on August 1, the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), the country's main opposition group, reconvened on October30 for the "second session" of its sixth congress. Before this meeting, the BNF had become polarized over two leaders: Zyanon Paznyak, who has been in exile since 1996 and led the BNF for a decade, and Vintsuk Vyachorka, a younger opposition leader and one of the main organizers of the October 17 "freedom march."

In the meantime, Paznyak's supporters convened their own congress on September26 and renamed the BNF Party as the Conservative Christian Party of the BNF, simultaneously electing Zyanon Paznyak its leader. Vyachorka's supporters said the September 26 congress was illegal and has not recognized the Conservative Christian Party as the legal successor to the BNF Party. The October 30 congress was devoted to electing a leader of the BNF as a public organization (from a legal viewpoint, the BNF exists in two forms — as a public association and as a political party bearing the same name).

On October 30, however, Paznyak's supporters blocked the entrance to the congress hall in order to prevent journalists and Vyachorka's people from entering. There was major confusion when Paznyak's supporters were assisted by the police in that effort. Here is how BelaPAN reported the event: "The congress began its work with a scandal--the BNF leadership did not agree on who should be considered a delegate to the second session. ...In the [congress] building, there were a lot of law enforcement officers from the police and AMAP (ed.itor: riot police) who cooperated with BNF teams [tasked with maintaining order]. The congress began with a two-hour delay, because the delegates were let in one by one and their documents were thoroughly checked.

There were many serious incidents when people were blocked from entering or forced out of the building. Journalists were able to enter the building only after the congress had started its work (they were not let into the congress hall). According to eyewitnesses, the congress debate was very heated, the delegates were overwhelmed by emotion — they snatched the microphone from one another [and] they did not allow the proceedings to be taped. ...After nearly 30 minutes of such wrangling, the delegates who opposed such a congress scenario...left the hall, intending to resume the congress session at 6 p.m. There were some 100 delegates who left in the hall — an insufficient number for a quorum (**Editor.**: 220 delegates are needed for a quorum)."

Some 240 BNF delegates convened later the same day and voted 228 to 11 to elect Vyachorka leader of the BNF public association. The congress also elected six BNF deputy chairmen: Ales Byalatski, Yury Khadyka, Vyachaslau Siuchyk, Pavel Sevyarynets, Anatol Fyodarau, and Viktar Ivashkevich.

The following day, the congress reconfirmed the same leadership for the BNF party. The legal situation of the BNF (both the public association and the party) is unclear, particularly with regard to which faction — Paznyak's or Vyachorka's — will be recognized by the Justice Ministry as the legal successor to the BNF before the split.

Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta, on October 1, provided an interesting, if emotional, comment by Alyaksandr Fyaduta: "Paznyak has not spared the reputation of the party. ...He allowed his followers to call to their help the police--that is, the authorities, which are branded by Paznyak as anti-popular, criminal, [and] illegitimate.

...What *Belarusskaya delovaya gazeta* repeatedly predicted...has happened: the BNF has been split by the [joint] efforts of Zyanon Paznyak and his joyous assistant Alyaksandr Lukashenka--the head of the authorities so hated by Paznyak. This is infamy. Even the KGB could not invent such a method for compromising the leader of Belarusian nationalists." (RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report #23,November 9, 1999



Vincuk Viačorka (Vyachorka)

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Democratic Groups Appeal to OSCE

Following is the text of the November 10, 1999, appeal by the Coordinating Council of Democratic Forces of Belarus to the heads of states-members of the OSCE

Dear Heads of States,

We, the representatives of different political parties, public organizations and trade unions of the Republic of Belarus, representing the majority of the civic society of our country, consider that the preservation of the independence of Belarus constitutes a basic factor for the restoration of democratic order in our country.

The so-called "Unification Agreement", which the since July 21 1999 illegitimate president Lukashenka is intended to draw with Russia, is precisely aimed at the incorporation of Belarus into Russia, contrary to the standards of international law. Such incorporation will threaten the security of Europe. All democratic institutions of power have been destroyed in Belarus, so that our people had no means of democratic determination of its future. At the same time, the mass public actions of protest, as well as the data of independent sociologists evidence that the overwhelming majority of Belarus citizens stands for the independence of their country.

We support the Appeal by Mr. Siamion Sharetski, the Chairman of the legitimate Supreme Soviet (Parliament), to the heads of the states-guarantors of Belarus's security — the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Russian Federation. We consider that the Russian Federation, by consistently supporting the illegitimate and antidemocratic regime of Lukashenka and carrying out the annexation of Belarus by the regime's hands, violates the Memorandum on the guarantees for Belarus' security, adopted at the Budapest summit of the OSCE in December 1994.

We appeal to the heads of the state-members of the OSCE asking to take measures in order to lift the threat to security in Europe, brought about by the possible destruction of the independence of Belarus by the antidemocratic regime of Lukashenka and the authorities of the Russian Federation. . Minsk, November 10, 1999

The Coordinating Council of Democratic Forces has been established by the Congress of Democratic Forces of Belarus on January 30, 1999. It includes the most influential democratic political parties and organizations: Belarusian Popular Front, Belarusian Social-Democratic Party (Peoples' Hramada), the United Civic Party, Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade-Unions, Assembly of Democratic Non-Governmental Organizations, Charter '97.

Lebedka and Zhuk Participate in Capitol Hill Briefing

By Alice A. Kipel

On November 17, 1999, at the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C., Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the International League for Human Rights sponsored a special briefing, entitled "Where The Wall Didn't Fall: Current Conditions in Belarus." Featured speakers at the briefing were Anatoly Lebedka, a Deputy in the 13th Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Belarus, and Pavel Zhuk, publisher of the independent Belarusian newspaper *Naviny*. Both men focussed on the domestic regime of terror created by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka, as well as the threat to international security posed by Lukashenka.

Specifically, Lebedka and Zhuk highlighted the disappearances of several opposition leaders. Zhuk likened the disappearances to those under Pinochet, where the disappearances started slowly. While the two speakers described the intimidation tactics employed by Lukashenka, they also showed clips of a video tape of an October 17 demonstration in Miensk. The video graphically depicted how Lukashenka's security forces effectively interfered with a peaceful protest. Indeed, this viewer was left with the impression that the camouflaged riot police, not knowing what to do in light of the fact that the protesters were behaving peacefully (and not wishing to displease their leader), purposefully provoked the protesters.

The West, however, bears partial responsibility for the current state of affairs in Belarus, according to Lebedka. In his opinion, in the early 1990s, the United States and other countries made a mistake in their initial attitude towards the newly-independent Belarus. They erred in concentrating their efforts almost exclusively on the removal of nuclear weapons from Belarus; democracy was not the concern. Instead, said Lebedka, resources should have been devoted to assisting with democratic reforms in Belarus. As a result, the "structure" necessary for democracy is lacking. To achieve such goals now is more difficult and costly, but must be done. An emphasis on elections alone is not enough. Unless the opposition first

ensures that there exists a viable parliamentary structure, Lukashenka's power will only be cemented.

Congressman Sam Gejdenson (D-CT), who attended and also sponsored the briefing, praised Lebedka and Zhuk for their courage in speaking out against a totalitarian regime. He also responded to Lebedka's criticism by stating that the West's initial focus on nuclear weapons was correct, but that now, the focus should be switched. Congressman Gejdenson aptly buttressed his view with the following remark, "Lukashenka with nuclear weapons would be much worse, but Belarus without Lukashenka would be better." Zhuk, Lebedka, and others in attendance concurred with the latter statement.

In fact, both Zhuk and Lebedka emphasized that strong pressure must be brought to bear on Lukashenka, both from inside and outside of Belarus, to prevent the spread of "Lukashism" to other countries, such as Russia, Ukraine and Moldova. Lukashenka's brand of government, which combines fascism, communism, chauvinism and populism, has demonstrated an ability to appeal to those disaffected after the fall of the Soviet Union. Thus, concluded Lebedka, security in Europe cannot be resolved with resolving the "Belarus question."



Anatol Labiedźka (Lebedka)

Vinnikava Reappears, Pledges to Go in for Politics

Last week's sensational news in Belarus was the reappearance of Tamara Vinnikava, former chairwoman of the Belarusian National Bank, who vanished in April while being under house arrest in Minsk.

Vinnikava was arrested on January 14, 1997 on charges of abuse of power and embezzlement. She spent 10 months in a KGB prison and was subsequently placed under house arrest. No court indictment has been issued against her.

On December 13, the Minsk-based *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta* published a statement by Vinnikava and an interview she gave Iryna Khalip, who is the deputy chief editor of the *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*. According to Khalip, Vinnikava called her on December 10 from abroad, asking to publish the statement. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Khalip posed some questions to the former chief banker. The taped Khalip-Vinnikava conversation is available in the Real Audio format at the *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta* web site.

In her statement, Vinnikava said "I was to die, and only chance and the will of the Almighty helped me avoid the fate prepared for me by the authorities." According to Vinnikava, her arrest was made to intimidate "the country, the government, [and] all the citizens." She stressed that she is not guilty of the charges brought against her, adding that "during two and a half years, 28 investigators were not able to fulfill a [political] order and pass my case to court." Vinnikava went on to say that she knows "some financial circumstances of the [Lukashenka] regime's existence," as well as "Lukashenka's critical dependence on Russian oligarchs and his criminal plans to destroy the country." She concluded: "I intend to do what the authorities fear most of all: I am going to be engaged in politics."

Answering Khalip's questions, Vinnikava said she is sure that prominent Belarusian oppositionist Henadz Karpenka was assassinated (Karpenka died in April in a Minsk hospital, following surgery for a brain hemorrhage). She added that she also knows what happened to several prominent oppositionists who disappeared in recent months — including Yury Zakharanka and Viktar Hanchar—but she refused to provide details.

In an interview with BBC's Russian Service on December 13, Vinnikava shed more light on reasons for and circumstances of her arrest. She said Lukashenka ordered the arrest after she opposed some "dirty deals" planned by the government. "A month before my arrest, there was a need to strike a dirty deal worth $1 billion. In order to realize what $1 billion means for the Republic of Belarus, I want to say that the entire capital of all Belarus's commercial banks is equal to $80 million.... I was against that deal.... Next, there was another deal worth $600 million. Then, there was a deal regarding the creation of the state gold reserves by way of barter trade. Next, there were deals involving Torgexpo — that was when a flood of non-taxed vodka and tobacco products entered Russia. I was against those deals.... They might not amount to $1 billion, but approximately to $300,000. And they sparked inflation. The August 17 [market collapse in Russia] is not to blame for the woes of Belarusian economy, but rather those deals are," Vinnikava said.

Vinnikava divulged that on the eve of her arrest she was at a party organized by Lukashenka (to mark the New Year according to the Orthodox, old-style calendar), where he "wished me many successes and gave me many compliments."

The next day, Lukashenka invited her to a session of the State Control Committee, where she was unexpectedly arrested. How did she manage to escape? "I was being transferred from the group of my guards to a group of, let's say, people who deal with physical liquidation. And then a small oversight took place, which I cannot discuss," Vinnikava told the BBC. In an interview with RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on December 17, Vinnikava said she will tell the names of those who wanted to kill her to Lukashenka if he expresses his desire to know them. So far, there has been no official comment from Minsk on Vinnikava's revelations. (RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report #.29, December 21, 1999)

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BELARUS' ECONOMY

Who Runs Belarus' Economy?

Tamara Vinnikava — former chairwoman of the Belarusian National Bank, who disappeared from under house arrest in Minsk in April and reappeared in the media on December 13 — disclosed some sensational information about the operation of Belarus' economy to RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on December 18. According to Vinnikava, following the presidential election victory by Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 1994, Belarus has been transformed by Russian criminal capital into a "money laundering machine." In her opinion, Belarus today is managed not by Lukashenka, but by "Russian oligarchs" who gave money for his election campaign. "Today [Russian] oligarchs rule the republic. Alyaksandr Lukashenka cannot make any appointment without coordination with them.... It is not Lukashenka who does not reform the national

economy, it is not Lukashenka who does not privatize factories. Today it is very convenient to have gigantic enterprises [in Belarus] that consume [huge amounts] of metal and purchase fertilizers for [vast areas] of land.... It is convenient for oligarchs to supply trainloads of production in exchange for [Belarusian] budget money," Vinnikava told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service director Alexander Lukashuk. However, she declined to mention any names.

To launder their dirty money, Vinnikava argued, Russian oligarchs supply Belarus with more products that it actually needs. The multiplicity of currency exchange rates in Belarus is instrumental for them in obtaining huge profits. "The point is that today oligarchs supply raw materials to the Republic of Belarus. They supply more that we need. They supply them at lower prices than, for example, to Ukraine or other countries. Because it is they who take the profit. Even if they lose owing to the difference in prices, they make it up during the operation of converting [payments] into hard currency," Vinnikava noted. And added: "Why is there the need for a single [Russian-Belarusian] currency? Because Russia must be paid for what it supplies. And it will supply ceaselessly. Because there is money laundering [underway]. Belarus has been transformed into a money laundering machine."

RFE/RL's Belarusian Service asked Stanislau Bahdankevich, who headed the Belarusian National Bank directly before Vinnikava, to comment on her revelations. According to Bahdankevich, Vinnikava's presentation of economic realities in Belarus is exaggerated. He said: "Russia supplies us mainly with oil and gas. The share of these supplies is very significant. As regards other supplies, they are not so big. Belarus supplies more finished products to Russia than Russia to Belarus. We receive more raw materials and energy resources." Bahdankevich was also doubtful about the profits obtained by Russian suppliers in trade with Belarus: "I am of the opposite opinion--it is Russia that today finances the Lukashenka regime. Russia supplies fuel to Belarus at prices two or three times lower lower than to Europe, the Baltics, or Ukraine. For 1,000 cubic meters of gas, we today pay $30, while Ukrainians $60. But even for such supplies we are not able to pay in a timely manner."

As to who takes advantage of the multiplicity of currency exchange rates in Belarus, Bahdankevich said: "Indeed, there is a problem with exchange rates. And there is profiteering. But again, I doubt that it is Russian capital that speculates on the Belarusian market. I think it is primarily Lukashenka's entourage that profiteers." Asked why Vinnikava reappeared with her disclosures right now, Bahdankevich commented: "Possibly, on one hand, Vinnikava wants to vindicate herself, on the other, it is also possible that Russian oligarchs are ready to surrender Lukashenka, because in actual fact Lukashenka is a barrier to an inflow of Russian capital into Belarus. He does not conduct reforms, he does not privatize big enterprises, and so on." (RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report #30, December 28, 1999)

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BELARUSIAN CULTURE

Belarusans in the United States

by Vitaut Kipel
Reviewed by Ihar Kazak

In this our decade of ardent nationalism and newly arising nations it is not at all surprising to see an entire gamut of publications on countries that heretofore were pretty much terra incognita to the average American reader, and so it is not surprising, to paraphrase a well-known saying, to discover that "Yes, Virginia, there is a Belarusan people!" Such revelations are the quintessential stuff of which Vitaut Kipel's voluminous work on the Belarusans in America is all about: (Kipel, Vitaut: *Belarusans in the United States*. Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1999. 568 pp, hardcover, $56.00).

From the initial introductory chapters it becomes self-evident that to "conceptualize Belarus," as the author himself tries to explain to the reader, is not an easy task at all. He provides a thorough historical background to Belarus, its origin and glory as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 14th century and its ultimate fate to be wedged in between two powerful political forces: the Polish and the Russian. The author attempts to explain this by the two general categories: the polonization and russification forces, which had in impact on the further development of Belarus.

But how does all this relate to the Belarusans in the United States?

For the author it is a simple formulation as far as the confusion in statistical data for tracking immigrants into this country by ethnic origin is concerned: it is the fault of the U.S. government bureaucracy! Nationality as opposed to citizenship was still a vague one, according to the author, and U.S. government officials were not "sensitive to the problem of nationality." So that the immigrants coming to these shores from the Russian Empire were simply counted as Russian, though hundreds of thousands were actually Belarusans, as it turns out to be. According to Kipel some 600,000 to 650,000 Belarusans came to the United States originally. They were all lumped under the category of Russian.

Mr. Kipel's book is roughly divided into the pre-1900 period, the pre-WWI time, the time segment between the two World Wars, and the post-WWII period of the political immigration to this country. Moreover, he has his topics conveniently divided into various Belarusan-American cultural activities throughout this span of history. The political and religious spheres, of course, are also examined.

Throughout the book the leitmotif is that of one's search for ethnic identity. A concomitant topic is that of Belarusans who do not display this ethnic and national awareness. Here, unfortunately, the researcher resorts to labeling of such groups that are in this latter category. Many of these groups had a Russian orientation, he discovered. A major political wave of Belarusan emigres came to the U.S. after WWII. Here the author is now on more familiar ground, for he too was one of the two million displaced persons from Eastern Europe seeking a new homeland in the U.S. It is in a way relating one's own story but in macrocosm. Not a Studs Terkel by any means, Vitaut Kipel is nonetheless able to shore up his arguments with oral tradition interviews and eyewitness testimony. This renders some portions of the text with rather readable passages.

Another element in the book is the presentation of the duality of political views of Belarusans transposed from Germany's displaced persons camps to the U.S. The followers of the Belarusan Central Council (Belarusan acronym BCR), headed by Radaslau Astrouski, who by some Belarusans was condemned as a Nazi collaborator for fighting the Bolsheviks and using to this end an association with the Third Reich vis-a-vis the Council of the Belarusan Democratic Republic, in exile since 1919-20 and under the leadership of Mikola Abramchyk, were the two political forces for Belarusans in Germany and Western Europe and transplanted to the U.S. thereafter. "As time passed and the younger generation moved into the arena of Belarusan diaspora politics, this divisiveness has gradually subsided and, in day-to-day affairs, it has faded

into insignificance." the author assures the reader. All were staunch anti-Communists. Thus we have, to be sure, the first political Belarusan immigrants to the U.S.

The most prominent of all these Belarusan-American organizations were actually two: the Belarusan-American Association (BAZA) founded in 1949 and the Belarusan-American Congress Committee, which began to emerge a bit later on in the early 1950s. The former, as the author observes, has for its ideological position a renewed representation of the Belarusan Democratic Republic. The Belarusian Congress Committee of America — Mr. Kipel calls it erroneously the Belarusian-American Congress Committee--on the other hand, he declares, espouses for its political base of a Belarusan state, the Belarusan Democratic Republic, albeit the distinction being - according to Mr. Kipel - that their point of reference and adherence to an ideological loyalty was the Belarusan Central Council. This point is most vehemently denied by members of the Belarusian Congress Committee of America, who characterize themselves as "an American-oriented, chartered organization" concerned with U.S. national and Belarus policies, but not attempting to formulate the latter. One is nonetheless surprised that in all the years of research such inaccuracies would occur with Mr. Kipel. The sad result of this misnaming is that anyone interested in the organization would not be able to find it on the Internet, in libraries, etc. - certainly not under Mr. Kipel's fictitious title of Belarusian American Congress Committee. This by no means renders veracity to much of the other text.

The years in the Slavic Division of the New York Public Library for Mr. Kipel, it would appear, paid their dividends. The book is studded with footnotes and bibliographic references, the implication being that if one cites primary sources one can thus prove one's point without an obstacle. The problem with such an approach, one would think, is that there is an inherent a priori assumption that one can prove the non-recognition of Belarusan ethnicity in the U.S. by reasoning that 1) the Belarusans who came to this country were indoctrinated by the Russians (and to some degree by Poles), and that 2) they were not sophisticated enough to realize their own ethnic and nationality status. On both counts, one must find this to be an incorrect assumption. The Belarusans who came here initially were economic immigrants to this country and nothing more. This by no means diminishes their subsequent value and status as Belarusan-Americans. On the contrary, they adhered to their language (as corrupted as it may have been by Russian and English linguistic encroachment), their culture and their traditions, perhaps more so than some other groups that were more easily assimilated into the American mosaic. The other assumption, equally as fallacious, is that if a particular person was born in the territory then known as the Northwestern Territories of Czarist Russia, and if that person did speak (or not necessarily so) Belarusan and had traditions which were of that area, that person must be Belarusan. Wrong! To use a folksy expression albeit not Belarusan but Armenian as it were: "If a fly is born in a stable, does it mean it's a horse?"

By the time one reaches Chapter IX on religious structures, one's head is swimming from detailed and closely elaborated and collaborated facts, names, and innuendo. As far as all the names mentioned in the book are concerned, the author can be assured that many thus immortalized will be readers and purchasers of this history volume. In fact, very often one gets the impression that an analogy of this compendium with that of a college, nay, high school annual can be easily drawn, wherein the editors are describing mostly such individuals as they are familiar with and/or favor over others. Alone for the Kipel family, for example, there are some seventy-odd references in the book! A truly family affair, it would seem.

Chapters 10 through 12, debatably, are the most important sections of the book, because they deal with the cultural, political, artistic, and literary activities of the Belarusan-American community as it directly impacts their lives and community and country, i.e. the U.S. and not some far-off country of origin. Congressional liaison with the U.S. Congress, Belarusan anniversaries and other examples are provided. The author laments that "more important is the fact that for decades an entire European nation was ignored, mislabeled, and thrust into non-existence because of bureaucratic processes, and now this nation, a vital and significant part of the American mosaic, is making an attempt to reclaim a crucial portion of its American mosaic: its authentic ethnic identity." I don't know about Mr. Kipel's striving to "reclaim his authentic ethnic identity," but scores of naturalized Americans of Belarusan origin and those that are of subsequent generations never had any problem in these United States of America to assert their individual ethnic past if they so wished. At which juncture one is confronted by three worlds: one, representing the Russian Empire's chauvinistic view (present day not excluded!) of the "One-and-Indivisible" Russia with all its concomitant nationalities, ethnic minorities, and diverse cultures under the "patronage" of the "Big Brother;" the second world, that of an extreme nationalist, also infected with chauvinistic attitudes, who totally, culturally, and certainly politically, is divorcing himself from the past and beginning to assert his ethnicity and nationality in a most ostentatious manner; and then, the third world (an intentional allusion) which is perhaps best exemplified by Leopold Senghor in his criticism of affected racial and national pride: "Does a tiger have to proclaim his "tigritude"?"he argues.

Under the rubric "Publishing, Print Media, Readership, Records, Radio, TV" some interesting historical background information has been culled from various sources by the cox We find out about the newspapers Backauscyna (though actually published in Germany) and Bielarus (published in New York). The former regrettably has ceased publications, while the latter is approaching its fiftieth anniversary, but has also experienced lack of financial backing lately. On the other hand, the Belarusian Review receives but scant mentioning.

We also find out that collected works of numerous Belarusan writers and poets were published. Unfortunately, despite the proximity of Mr. Kipel's activities to the New York Public Library and its superlative Slavic Division, some of the information is erroneous and in other data there is considerable dearth. To wit: Natalla Arsienneva's "collected works" is a one volume book of poetry, mostly from the "old country" written in the 20s and 30s. Ales Salaviej is a Belarusan-Australian, and Uladzimier Dudzicki is, in fact, a "lost Belarusan American," for this sad soul re-emigrated to the Soviet Union, never to be heard of again. On the other hand, a Belarusan-American poet and writer such as, for example, Ryhor Krushyna, who has published seven books of poetry abroad, six of which came out in the U.S., is not mentioned at all in this particular listing (or perhaps he is to be assumed under the "..and others" category). This could be considered a significant literary faux-pax for an accomplished Slavic bibliographer, but unfortunately it isn't. There is, it would appear, with some compilers the tendency to assess merits of a poet or writer not by a judgement of his or her universal, worldly conceptions, lyricism, genre, the human experience, and other ubiquitous human qualities as portrayed in the individual's works, but rather on how vociferously nationalistic and "patriotic" that individual expresses himself/herself in literary or political statements. It is politization of ethnic literature at the highest level of ethnocentrism. Simply put: if I shout out to high heaven that I am a Belarusan, proclaim my Belarusanness, my tigritude, I am a true Belarusan, I am worthy of many citations and many praises for my "accomplishments."

But, Mr. Kipel: culture, social and political developments and all its concomitant variations are all a result of an interaction of nations and civilizations. They are not a one-way, xenophobic manifestation, but are rather a result of different contributions of different peoples throughout history. Such is the case with Belarus. Many factors, good and evil, positive and negative, overt and covert, consequential and inconsequential made up the historical pattern and background of this unique land we know as Belarus. All of its neighbors have made such contributions to and/or impacted Belarus. That includes Poland and Russia. To be sure, the former attempted to annihilate Belarusan consciousness in the population, while the latter practiced a policy of assimilation. If one reads Kipel's work, all russification practices within the Russian Czarist Empire were forceful. This cannot be collaborated with scholarly research, for even a layman's reference work such as the pre-Revolutionary edition of the Brokgauz i Efron encyclopedia (v. 8) stated that "The current Belorusan movement is none other than a Renaissance. The Belarusans have a substantive historical past and the greatest period, their Golden Age, was during the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The manifestation of the Belarusan movement inevitably distinguishes itself by one characteristic: its democracy. [This] democracy is the reason for the main tendency to have a total lack of elements of national chauvinism, it is alien to such tendencies as misanthropic activities, despite the fact that in latter years a new tendency is being perceived: the clerical and nationalistic extreme rightist view, close to the All-Russian Nationalist Union, the national awakening of the Belorusans as a whole is characterized in that it counteracts chauvinistic activities which are conducted in Belarus by two feuding camps: the Russian and Polish nationalists, the orthodox and catholic clergy." This is a quote from a Czarist period authoritative encyclopedia for the masses. But again, during Soviet times a forceful and genocidal policy against the Belarusan intelligentsia was indeed practiced, and on a massive scale. Such facts are indisputable!

It is indeed unfortunate that scholarly, well-researched books on such meaningful subjects to Belarusan-Americans and Slavic scholars alike should be tarnished with reiterative chauvinistic nuances and accusations. It is unfortunate because it is reminiscent of Soviet-style tactics in regards to the German-Nazi impact that has been used as a scapegoat for all the negative manifestations and own deficiencies brought upon the people by the Communist regime. It has been certainly no simple task to establish one's separate national and ethnic identity for the Belarusan-American community here in the past. However, these problems and obstacles have been overcome, especially when Belarus has initially detached itself from the persistent fold of the Soviet Union in 1991. And now again, after the infamous event of December 8, 1999, Belarus faces a challenge to overcome its current crisis, but be assured, Belarus will do it on its own!

Ihar Kazak, the son of the immigrant father, Belarusian poet Ryhor Krushyna, is a former journalist, who has known many Belausian political and literary figures in this country and Belarus.

BELARUSIANS ABROAD

Sharetski Asking to Honor Independence and Sovereignty of Belarus

Semion Sharetsky, speaker of the West-recognized 13th Supreme Soviet of Belarus, in a letter to President Clinton, Prime Minister Blair and President Yeltsin, is urging the three leaders to honor their committment to respect the independence and sovereignty of Belarus in accordance with the CSCE (now OSCE) 1994 memorandum signed in Budapest. Following is the text of the letter.

Dear President Clinton, Prime Minister Blair, President Yeltsin,

On the 5th of December 1994 you have signed the Memorandum on Security Assurances to Belarus in connection with the finalizing of the succession of our state as regards START and NPT Treaties. The Memorandum that you have signed contains your commitments "to respect in accordance with the principles of the CSCE Final Act, the independence and sovereignty of Belarus".

Today the time has come to comply with your commitments since the independence of Belarus is being threatened by the activities of the former president Lukashenko.

The so called Union Treaty that the former president Lukashenko wants to sign with Russia is aimed at incorporation of Belarus into other state in defiance of the norms of international law since in the absence of democratic institutions in the republic the people of Belarus are deprived of the possibility to determine their own destiny.

President Yeltsin, one of the guarantors of the Belarusian independence, grossly violates Russian commitments by inevitably supporting the policy of the former president Lukashenko aimed at elimination of the independent status of Belarus. The policy of President Yeltsin openly directed at the annexation of Belarus, has led to the state terror unleashed by Lukashenko against the Belarusian people, to the disappearances and deaths of people. The lack of a clear denunciation on the part of the USA and Great Britain of these annexation efforts contributes to this policy

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Dear President Clinton, Prime Minister Blair, President Yeltsin,

As representatives of the sole legitimate power in the Republic of Belarus -the Supreme Soviet - we demand the conscientious compliance with your international commitments, in particular those concerning the protection of the independence of our state. In this connection we would like to refer to the paragraph in the Memorandum that envisages "consultations in the event a situation arises which raises questions concerning these commitments". Since you undertook these commitments during the Budapest CSCE Summit we think it appropriate to have the above consultations during the forthcoming OSCE Summit in November without the now unlawful president Lukashenko or his representatives. From our side we are ready to send a special envoy to participate in these consultations.

In our view, the consultations should be focused on your compliance with the commitments to protect the independence of Belarus as well as on the danger that the situation in Belarus causes to the international peace and security.

On behalf of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Belarus,
Semion Sharetski, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Belarus

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SOURCE: Press Release, Charter 97
Minsk, October 1999
http://www.charter97.org/English

Belarus-Russia Treaty: Westward Expansion of Russian Empire

Following is the text of a statement by the Council (Rada) of the Belarusan Democratic Republic in Exile on the proposed "Treaty on the Formation of the Union State of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation."

STATEMENT

On October 19, 1999, the draft of "The Treaty on the Formation of the Union State of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation" was published. The document, which is scheduled to be signed by Boris Yeltsin and Alexander Lukashenka in December of this year, is an ominous indication of an expansion westward of Russia at the expense of Belarus' freedom and independence. This development is taking place in conjunction with the massive violation of human rights and of democratic principles in Belarus, including the persecution and abduction of political opponents to Lukashenka.

The treaty enables Moscow to extend its power westward by supporting in Belarus, within the projected confederated state, an oppressive regime that would remain submissive to the Kremlin. Although the treaty speaks of "sovereignty" and "independence" of both states within the would-be union, in reality it amounts to an act of annexation of Belarus by Russia. The subservient position of Belarus is reflected in the structure of the union governing bodies. The danger for Belarus of losing its independence is increased by the obsessive drive of its autocratic leader to restore an entity that would be, according to his own statements, more mighty than the former Soviet Union.

The dangerous ramifications of the Belarusan-Russian union treaty for the international community are obvious. The treaty stipulates that the position of chairman of the Supreme Council of the Union, among whose prerogatives is power to conduct international negotiations, will be held on a rotation basis by the presidents of the two constituent states. This gives Belarus' anti-Western dictator Lukashenka power to use Russia's nuclear arsenal to blackmail the world.

The contrived deal between Moscow and Minsk will also cause dangerous turmoil within the would-be confederation itself, especially in Belarus, where a 20,000-strong demonstration against the merger with Russia took place on October 17, 1999. The demonstration showed that young Belarusans are becoming increasingly vocal in defense of their country's independence. Since Lukashenka's legitimacy as president of Belarus after July 20, 1999, has been disputed domestically and internationally, a treaty on union with Russia co-signed by him will continue to be rejected by the democratic opposition in Belarus and questioned by some of Russia's liberals. The end result of the treaty will be to increase turmoil both in Russia and Belarus.

In view of what is being schemed by Belarus' illegitimate ruler and his imperialist associates in Moscow, it is incumbent upon the United States and the United Kingdom to stand up in defense of Belarus. Such an obligation ensues from the Memorandum on Security Assurances to Belarus signed by President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister John Major in Budapest on December 5, 1994. The Memorandum, finalizing the accession of Belarus to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, contains a commitment "to respect the independence, sovereignty and the territorial integrity" of Belarus.

Council of the Belarusan Democratic Republic in Exile
Ottawa, Canada, November 1, 1999

Radio Stations in Lithuania and Poland Ready to Break Belarusian News Blockade

On January 1, a new non-governmental radio station, Baltijos Bangu Radijas (Baltic Waves Radio), began broadcasting informational programs in the Belarusian language. The programs will be heard in neighboring Belarus. The Lukashenko regime has repeatedly expressed its dissatisfaction at the prospect. The Baltic Waves Radio along with a few non-governmental Polish and Czech stations are seeking to counter-balance radio and television content in Belarus, which is strictly controlled by the government. Another radio station headquartered in the Polish city Bialystok began transmissions in Belarusian on December 29, TV Polonia satellite service reported.

The coordinator of the Baltic Waves project and a member of parliament Rimantas Pleikys told a BNS correspondent that the radio station will only broadcast for one half hour per day and will probably expand to four hours of programming later. Eight hours per day are planned by the end of the year 2000. Transmissions from Vilnius on the medium wave at 612 kHz will be heard in Lithuania and western Belarus. Pleikys has also told BNS that foreign intelligence services are taking a special interest in the radio station's work. He declined to name which countries he had in mind, but said the address of the station's headquarters will remain unlisted for this reason. Funds from western nations for the support of free speech and the strengthening of democracy are financing the station's activities. The radio station is a combined international information channel, with rebroadcasts of programming in Belarusian from Prague, Warsaw, Bialystok, and Vilnius. The Belarusian opposition earlier voiced its satisfaction with the establishment of the new radio station. Pleikys, a journalist by training, stressed that the radio station doesn't intend to become "a mouthpiece of one party or another on this or that side of the barricade." He intends to air the official position of the Belarusian government, but, at the same time, to present the opposition's assessment of it, and to present the latter's goals and projects to the listening audience. (Baltic News Service, December 30, 1999; TV Polonia satellite service, December 29. 1999)

NEWS BRIEFS

BELARUSIAN WORKERS PROTEST GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC POLICIES — "Our enterprises are becoming bankrupt because of the current economic policy, extortionate taxes, the multitude of Belarusian ruble exchange rates, and excessive state expenditures," some 15,000 workers said in a statement adopted at a rally in Minsk on 30 September. The rally demanded that President Alyaksandr Lukashenka cancel his decree introducing a contract system of employment in Belarus. It also supported the trade union petition requesting access to state-controlled media, which some 300,000 people have already signed. Alyaksandr Bukhvostau, a trade union leader, told the crowd that the authorities resorted to "draconian measures" in order to prevent Minsk workers from participating in the demonstration. "As long as we have such a political authority, the state has no prospects," Belapan quoted Bukhvostau as saying. (RFE/RL Newsline, 1 October, 1999)

LUKASHENKA SAYS RUSSIA-BELARUS UNION TREATY DRAFT IS LAUGHING STOCK'... — The Belarusian president on 30 September lashed out at Moscow for not meeting his expectations with regard to the planned Russia-Belarus union state. Referring to a draft union treaty ap-

proved by Russian President Boris Yeltsin for publication in the media, Lukashenka said "it is a laughing stock, not a treaty," Interfax reported. He added that the proposed draft "does not differ at all" from the union treaty currently in force. Lukashenka said he does not intend to publish the draft for public discussion in Belarus because he has a "constitutional right" to sign it even in its "radical version," which would provide for a common presidency. "If Yeltsin does not sign it, I still have time to sign the treaty with someone else," Lukashenka noted. (RFE/RL Newsline, 1 October, 1999)

...LAMBASTES RUSSIA'S YAVLINSKII FOR 'INSULTING' BELARUS — Referring to Russian State Duma deputy Grigorii Yavlinskii's recent proposal to close the Russian-Belarusian border and stop financing Belarus, Lukashenka said Yavlinskii "appeared on television screens [on 26 September] on the orders of the West and, first and foremost, the U.S.," Interfax reported. According to Lukashenka, Yavlinskii's suggestions that Belarus is a "black hole" and a "weight around Russia's feet" are "insulting" to the Belarusian people. He added that he is sure that Yavlinskii's proposal was an election gimmick. "It will be a pity for Russia if such people come to power there, because they are pro-Western-minded politicians," Lukashenka commented. (RFE/RL Newsline, 1 October, 1999)

BELARUS PAYS COMPENSATION FOR EXPULSION OF U.S. AMBASSADOR — The Belarusian government has earmarked $119,500 in compensation to the U.S. Embassy in Minsk for the expulsion of Ambassador Daniel Speckhard from his residence at Drazdy in June 1998, Belapan reported. Earlier, the U.S. had said it invested some $800,000 in the reconstruction of Speckhard's residence there. (RFE/RL Newsline, 1 October, 1999)

SPLIT WITHIN BELARUSIAN POPULAR FRONT WIDENS — Activists of the opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BNF who support BNF acting chairman Lyavon Barshcheuski convened a session of the BNF Board on 3 October, Belapan reported. The activists said the recent creation of the Conservative Christian Party of the BNF (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 27 September 1999) was illegal. They argued that the Conservative Christian Party of the BNF, which is headed by BNF exiled leader Zyanon Paznyak, cannot be considered a legal successor to the existing BNF. The BNF expects to resolve the problem of its leadership at a 30-31 October meeting, which will formally conclude the BNF congress held this summer (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 2 and 3 August 1999). (RFE/RL Newsline, 4 October, 1999)

REGISTRATION OF BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION NEWSPAPER REVOKED — Belarus' State Press Committee has revoked the registration of nine periodicals, including "Nasha svaboda," the successor to the opposition newspaper "Naviny," which closed down following the imposition of a heavy fine (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 29 September 1999), Belapan reported on 4 October. The committee said the registration was revoked because the periodicals failed to produce documents confirming that the appropriate local authorities had approved the location of their offices. Mikhalay Khalezin, deputy chief editor of "Naviny"/"Nasha svaboda," told Belapan that the move is "a pretext to prevent our newspaper from coming out, and one should not look for any legal motive here." (RFE/RL Newsline, 5 October, 1999)

GERMAN JUDGES AWARD BELARUSIAN LAWYER HUMAN RIGHTS PRIZE — TheGerman Association of Judges on 4 October awarded its hu man rights prize to Belarusian lawyer Vera Stremkouskaya for "her courage in supporting politically persecuted persons," dpa reported. Stremkouskaya is one of a handful of Belarusian lawyers who defend Belarusian dissidents and oppositionists in court. The Belarusian Justice Ministry has threatened tobar Stremkouskaya from practicing law, while the Belarusian Lawyers' Association has reprimanded her for what it calls her political involvement. (RFE/RL Newsline, 5 October, 1999)

BELARUS FAILS TO AGREE ON MONETARY MERGER WITH RUSSIA — Belarusian National Bank head Pyotr Prakapovich said on 4 October that negotiations with Russia's Central Bank on the unification of the Belarusian and Russian monetary systems have failed to yield results, Belapan reported. Belarus had proposed setting up a Currency Council (composed of Russia's and Belarus's Central Banks as well as their Finance and Economy Ministries) as a joint issuing center and gradually making the "Russian non-cash ruble" the union's currency. Russia proposed to make its central bank as the only issuing center and to switch "overnight" to the "Russian non-cash ruble" "within three to five years from now." Prakapovich noted that "it will be very difficult to find a compromise...because there is anarchy in Russia right now and it is difficult for the Central Bank to adopt fundamental decisions." (RFE/RL Newsline, 5 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN POLICE RAIDS OFFICE OF HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP — Belarusian police officers, some of which were in plainclothes, entered the office of the Spring-96 human rights group in Minsk on 4 October without a search warrant and confiscated its office equipment, Belapan reported on 5 October. Ales Byalatski, head of the Spring-96 group, said the confiscated computers stored data on human rights violations in Belarus. Byalatski is an expert for the opposition delegation to the OSCE-mediated talks with the authorities. Byalatski added that Deputy Interior Minister Mikhail Udovikau was among those searching the office but did not identify himself. (RFE/RL Newsline, 6 October, 1999)

BELARUS, RUSSIA AGREE TO PUBLISH UNION TREATY DRAFT NEXT WEEK — Russian Minister for CIS Affairs Leonid Drachevskii and Belarusian Premier Syarhey Linh, meeting in Minsk on 5 October, agreed that the draft of a Russia-Belarus union treaty and a program for its implementation will be published in both countries' press next week, ITAR-TASS reported. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said last week that the treaty draft is a "laughing stock" and that he does not intend to publish it (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 1 October 1999). Following the publication of the draft, the Executive Committee of the Russia-Belarus Union will consider all comments and proposals on the treaty. Drachevskii said the two sides expect the treaty to be signed and ratified this year. (RFE/RL Newsline, 6 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES CONTINUE TO PUT PRESSURE ON INDEPENDENT MEDIA — Minsk tax inspectors have requested that the State Press Committee close the independent weekly "Belaruskaya maladzyozhnaya," Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 6 October. According to those inspectors, the weekly's editorial office is not located at the official address that it registered with the committee, which, they said, violates the press law. Tatsyana Melnichuk, chief editor of "Belaruskaya maladzyozhnaya," said she was told in a private conversation with a tax inspector that there is "an instruction from the top" to close down the weekly. "Belaruskaya maladzyozhnaya" appeared in 1994 and was run by radio journalists after the authorities closed down the radio station of the same name. (RFE/RL Newsline, 7 October, 1999)

PACE LAYS DOWN CONDITIONS FOR READMISSION OF BELARUS — Wolfgang Behrendt, rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for Belarus,

said in Minsk on 6 October that Belarus can regain its special guest status in the PACE only after fulfilling three conditions. According to Behrendt, Belarus must hold free and democratic parliamentary elections in 2000, increase the powers of the parliament, and improve its human rights record. Behrendt said the election code currently discussed in Belarus's National Assembly must be improved, and he offered help from Strasbourg experts. Behrendt also expressed concern over the disappearance of prominent oppositionists in Belarus. "How was this possible in a country where state control over all the spheres of public life is so extremely strong?" RFE/RL's Belarusian Service quoted him as saying. (RFE/RL Newsline, 7 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT GIVES CABINET THREE MONTHS TO IMPROVE RECORD — At a 7 October cabinet session, Alyaksandr Lukashenka harshly criticized the government for its "unsystematic approach to economic policy as well as inconsistency and half-heartedness in dealing with key socio-economic issues," Belapan reported. According to the president, in the first eight months of this year Belarus failed to meet all targets in all key socio-economic spheres except for industrial output, consumer goods output, housing construction, and consumer services. "Twenty one percent of industrial enterprises have no working capital, almost 36 percent have working capitals below the [required] norm. In essence, these enterprises have no future," Belarusian Television quoted Lukashenka as saying. Lukashenka gave the cabinet three months to improve its record.(RFE/RL Newsline, 8 October, 1999)

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT URGES BELARUS TO ENTER DEMOCRATIC PATH — The European Parliament on 7 October adopted a resolution urging Minsk to embark on a path of democratic political and economic reforms and to observe European human rights standards. The resolution appeals to the Belarusian authorities to clarify the recent disappearance of prominent Belarusian oppositionists and guarantee freedom of the press and freedom of expression. It also calls on Lukashenka to allow free and fair presidential elections in 1999 and parliamentary elections in 2000. The European Parliament also stressed that it ceased to recognize Lukashenka's presidential powers after 20 July 1999. (RFE/RL Newsline, 8 October, 1999)

DRAFT TREATY ON BELARUS-RUSSIA UNION UP FOR DISCUSSION... — Leanid Kozik, Belarusian representative to the Belarus-Russia Union structures, said on 8 October that public discussion of the union treaty draft, which was published last week, will be continued until the end of October. According to Kozik, media debates will be held, and the Union Executive Committee offices in Minsk and Moscow will collect comments by public associations and individuals. Belarusian presidential aide Mikhail Sazonau said that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his Russian counterpart, Boris Yeltsin, "will discuss the draft, taking into account public opinion, by the end of November." Sazonau added that they may sign the treaty then. Meanwhile, a Belapan poll held in Minsk in late September showed that 56 percent of respondents oppose the union state while 21 percent support it. (RFE/RL Newsline, 11 October, 1999)

...WHILE BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION SAYS DRAFT 'SURRENDERING INDEPENDENCE.' — The Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) has issued a statement saying that the draft treaty of the Belarus-Russian "surrenders independence of our country," Belapan reported on 10 October. According to the BNF, Belarusian "traitors" are planning to unite Belarus with the country that "has got stuck in a bloody imperialistic war in the Caucasus and disgraced itself through corruption scandals." The BNF said the draft stipulates that Belarusian troops will have to fight on Russia's side in the Caucasus, while Russia's "occupation army" will be deployed in Belarus. The BNF believes that neither the Belarusian people nor the international community will recognize the "traitorous anti-Belarusian papers" signed by the "illegitimate usurper and his puppet pseudo-parliament." (RFE/RL Newsline, 11 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT SAYS WEAK UNION TREATY BETTER THAN NOTHING — Alyaksandr Lukashenka stressed on 11 October that the Belarus-Russia union treaty draft published in the press of both countries last week does not introduce anything that differs in essence from the 1997 Belarusian-Russian union treaty, Belarusian Television reported. Lukashenka complained that the new document does not provide for a single union currency or a single money-issuing center. He added that while Belarus and Russia have agreed on the document, the draft is a "Russian version." Lukashenka argued, however, that the integration process must not be stopped and that the treaty must therefore be adopted even in its imperfect form. (RFE/RL Newsline,12 October, 1999)

FATE OF POLITICAL DIALOGUE IN BELARUS STILL UNCERTAIN. — The wing of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) that supports BNF Acting Chairman Lyavon Barshcheuski has ceased to be a full-fledged participant in the opposition group preparing the OSCE-mediated talks with the regime, Belapan reported on 12 October. Barshcheuski said the BNF will remain in the group only as an observer. He linked that decision to the authorities' recent crackdown on the independent press and NGOs in Belarus. According to Belapan, the opposition United Civic Party will issue a statement on "the impossibility of a negotiation process" in the current situation. Meanwhile, presidential aide Mikhail Sazonau told Belarusian Television on 12 October that the authorities are ready to start talks with the opposition "even today." However, Sazonau did not reveal whether the government will release political prisoners and grant the opposition access to the state-controlled media, as oppositionists have demanded. (RFE/RL Newsline,13 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENT TRADE UNION DENIED REGISTRATION — The Justice Ministry has refused to register the Belarusian Independent Industrial Trade Union Association, which unites two trade unions representing workers in the machine-building and electronic industries, Belapan reported on 13 October. The ministry gave no reason for its decision. Association leaders Alyaksandr Bukhvostau and Henadz Fyadynich believe that the move is the government's revenge for the association's independent stance and its many anti-government protest actions.(RFE/RL Newsline,14 October, 1999)

PRICE OF BREAD GOES UP IN BELARUS — Belapan reported on 12 October that the price of bread has recently risen by 2-30 percent, depending on quality and type. The authorities noted that the hike results from the increased price of flour and energy. Despite the hike, they noted, state bakeries are still incurring losses. A 1 kilogram loaf of rye bread currently costs 30,400 rubles ($0.1), while its production cost is 68,000. Belarusian commentators say the hike in bread prices may also be caused by this year's poor harvest. Belarus is currently seeking to buy some 2 million tons of grain abroad. (RFE/RL Newsline,14 October, 1999)

OSCE CHAIRMAN URGES DIALOGUE IN BELARUS — OSCE rotating Chairman Knut Vollebaek has called on the Belarusian authorities to take the necessary steps to resume talks between the government and the opposition, Belapan reported on 14 October. According to Vollebaek, the authorities should meet the following conditions for continuing a dialogue with the opposition: clarify the disappearance of opposition activist Viktar Hanchar, release former Premier

Mikhail Chyhir, and stop oppressing the independent press. Meanwhile, the opposition is preparing a "freedom march" in Minsk on 17 October as a show of popular support for political dialogue in Belarus. The authorities have refused to allow the opposition to hold the march in downtown Minsk. Instead, the march will take place at a location far removed from the city center.(RFE/RL Newsline,15 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION STAGES 'FREEDOM MARCH'... — An estimated 10,000-15,000 people took part in a "freedom march" and rally organized by the Belarusian opposition in Minsk on 17 October. The rally was the largest antigovernment demonstration in Belarus since spring 1996. Its participants urged President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to resign and demanded that the authorities cease pursuing a union with Russia, release political prisoners, and stop repression against the opposition. Demonstrators burned the text of the draft union treaty and then marched from the city outskirts, where the rally was authorized to take place, to the center. (RFE/RL Newsline,18 October, 1999)

...CLASHES WITH POLICE — On the way to the center, the crowd increased to some 20,000 people and was stopped by riot police 500 meters from the presidential administration building. Police used truncheons, tear gas, and rubber bullets to disperse demonstrators, who responded by hurling stones and pavement tiles. According to unofficial reports, nearly 150 people were injured in the clashes, including some 50 policemen. The authorities announced on 18 October that 92 people, including Social Democratic Party leader Mikalay Statkevich, had been arrested. "The action by the Belarusian opposition was earlier planned and financed by the West," AP quoted presidential administration chief Mikhail Myasnikovich as saying.(RFE/RL Newsline,18 October, 1999

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES CRACK DOWN ON PROTESTERS... — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 18 October ordered law enforcement agencies "to identify organizers and active participants in the riots" that he said took place during the 17 October opposition "freedom march" (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 18 October 1999), Belarusian Television reported. Lukashenka also instructed the state media to report on the "real goals" of the opposition action. Presidential aide Mikhail Myasnikovich said on state television that the Belarusian opposition received "several hundred thousand dollars" from the West to stage the protest. Meanwhile, Minsk courts on 18 October continued to hand down fines or prison sentences to those arrested during the march, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. Mikalay Statkevich, who was the main organizer of the march and is leader of the Social Democratic Party Narodnaya Hramada, faces three years in prison if convicted of organizing a "group action that grossly violated public order," a Minsk prosecutor said. (RFE/RL Newsline,19 October, 1999)

...WHILE OPPOSITION SAYS CLASHES PROVOKED BY POLICE. — Organizers of the " Freedom March" told a news conference in Minsk on 18 October that the clashes the previous day were provoked by riot police. According to Dzmitry Bandarenka, the police attacked the marching protesters after they turned back to avoid a police cordon. Bandarenka also asserted that Lukashenka personally ordered Interior Minister Yury Sivakou and presidential guard chief Uladzimir Navumau to suppress the protest action. According to the opposition, the authorities arrested some 200 people after the march, while another 100 have probably gone into hiding to avoid arrest. OSCE Minsk mission acting chief Hans-Peter Kleiner told Belapan that the authorities' refusal to allow the opposition to hold a march in downtown Minsk was the main reason behind the 17 October clashes. (RFE/RL Newsline,19 October, 1999)

BELARUS' SHARETSKI REPORTEDLY MEETS WITH KUCHMA — Syamyon Sharetski, chairman of the opposition Supreme Soviet, who is now residing in Lithuania, visited Kyiv last weekend at the invitation of Ukraine's Popular Rukh, Interfax reported on 18 October. Rukh spokesman Dmytro Ponomarchuk said Sharetski traveled to Kyiv "to warn Ukraine against repeating the Belarusian experience." Ponomarchuk added that Sharetski met with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. However, Kuchma's spokesman Oleksandr Martynenko said the presidential staff "has no information" about Kuchma's meeting with Sharetski. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk criticized Belarus for breaking up the 17 October opposition march. "Beating people who take advantage of the right to express their opinion does not conform with international norms," Interfax quoted Tarasyuk as saying. (RFE/RL Newsline,19 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES CONTINUE CRACKDOWN ON OPPOSITION — Of the 93 people arrested for taking part in the opposition's 17 October "freedom march," 17 have been sentenced to short prison terms and 19 fined, while 23 cases have been transferred to municipal commissions dealing with minors, according to a Minsk authorities statement quoted by Belapan on 19 October. The same day, Valery Shchukin, one of the march's organizers, was seized by police, beaten, and put in pre-trial detention. Police also detained Anatol Lyabedzka, another organizer of the march, but released him after four hours, ordering him to appear in court on 20 October. And a Minsk court sentenced Yauhen Afnahel, an activist of the opposition Youth Front, to 15 days in prison for organizing the march, despite the fact that Afnahel had withdrawn his name from the list of organizers before the march and did not participate in it, according to Belapan. (RFE/RL Newsline,20 October, 1999)

U.S. CONDEMNS BEATING OF BELARUSIAN PROTESTERS, WHILE RUSSIA SHRUGS IT OFF — The U.S. State Department on 18 October issued a statement condemning the violent suppression of the freedom march in Minsk the previous day. The U.S. State Department said the beating and arrests of participants in the peaceful march was another violation by Belarus of its OSCE commitments and a "further demonstration of the constitutional and political crisis" in the country. Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said on 19 October that the Minsk "incident" was Belarus's domestic matter, adding that Russia will not "intervene" in it. The same day the Russian State Duma invited Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to address Russian lawmakers on 22 October in connection with the "recent developments" in Belarus, ITAR-TASS reported. Simultaneously, Russian lawmakers rejected the Yabloko faction's proposal that Belarusian oppositionists also be invited to address the lower house.(RFE/RL Newsline,20 October, 1999)

JAILED BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER ON HUNGER STRIKE. — Social Democratic Party leader Mikalay Statkevich has gone on hunger strike to protest his 17 October arrest for helping organizing the "freedom march" (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 18 October 1999), Belapan reported on 20 October. Statkevich told a lawyer who visited him in jail that the clashes between riot police and demonstrators on 17 October were provoked by the authorities. He added that he will not answer questions posed by investigators. The same day, oppositionist Anatol Lyabedzka was sentenced to 10 days in prison for his part in organizing the "freedom march." Meanwhile, the Chamber of Representatives, a legislature hand-picked by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 1996, has condemned the opposition "freedom march" and applauded the intervention of law enforcement bodies. Belapan

quoted one deputy as saying that democrats should be beaten "correctly but very painfully." (RFE/RL Newsline,21 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION URGES RUSSIA TO STOP SUPPORTING LUKASHENKA — The Consultative Council of Belarusian opposition parties on 20 October adopted an appeal to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Premier Vladimir Putin, the State Duma, and the Federation Council to stop supporting the current Belarusian regime, Belapan reported. The appeal stressed that any agreements or treaties signed by Lukashenka after his term in office expired on 20 July 1999 may not and do not have any "legal force or political prospect." Belarusian oppositionists also expressed their intent to appeal to the international community to declare the Russian Federation an aggressor with regard to Belarus if Moscow continues supporting Lukashenka. Meanwhile, Lukashenka is to address Russia's lower house on 26 October at the invitation of Duma deputies. (RFE/RL Newsline,21 October, 1999)

BELARUS TO KNOCK THREE ZEROS OFF CURRENCY — President Lukashenka has ordered the exchange of old 1,000 Belarusian ruble bills for new 1 ruble ones over a three-year period beginning 1 January 2000. According to the edict, the move is intended "to strengthen the national currency, improve money circulation in the country, [and] simplify accounting and settlements in the national economy." The National Bank current exchange rate of the Belarusian ruble is 297,000 to $1, while the street exchange rate is some 660,000 to $1. Former National Bank head Stanislau Bahdankevich told Belapan that the edict can be justified from a "technical" viewpoint but is "absolute nonsense" from an economic one. According to Bahdankevich, Belarus has neither stabilized its economy nor suppressed inflation, thus the redenomination will not strengthen the Belarusian currency.(RFE/RL Newsline,21 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN NGO REGISTERS POLICE ATTROCITIES AFTER 'FREEDOM MARCH.' — The public association Legal Assistance to the Population has issued a statement citing "gross violations of human rights" by the riot police vis-a-vis those detained after the opposition "freedom march" on 17 October, Belapan reported on 21 October. The association said it has received a "large number" of complaints from people who suffered from police mistreatment. In particular, victims reported that policemen beat them with truncheons, insulted them using foul language, and kicked at and trampled on them during their transportation in vehicles to police stations. Meanwhile, the authorities have given "expensive gifts" to some 60 riot policemen involved in suppressing the "freedom march" and awarded medals "for selfless service" to five policemen injured in the clashes. (RFE/RL Newsline,22 October, 1999)

BELARUS WANTS TO IMPROVE TIES WITH EUROPE THROUGH FREE ELECTIONS — Belarusian Foreign Minister Ural Latypau told the Chamber of Representatives on 21 October that Belarus can normalize its relations with European countries primarily by holding free and democratic parliamentary and presidential elections, Belapan reported. In his opinion, talks between the government and the opposition could facilitate preparations for the elections. According to Latypau, the authorities are ready to begin such talks. He added, however, that the talks in Belarus will be different from those held in Poland and Czechoslovakia 10 years ago, when the opposing sides were "almost equal in strength" and discussed a transfer of power. In Belarus, Latypau said, an "absolute majority" of the population supports President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the two sides will discuss only how to hold elections that would be recognized by the EU as legitimate. (RFE/RL Newsline,22 October, 1999)

U.S. ENVOY SAYS U.S.-BELARUS RELATIONS 'VERY STRAINED.' — U.S. Ambassador to Minsk Daniel Speckhard told Belapan on 22 October that relations between the U.S. and Belarus have deteriorated in recent months and are now "very strained." Speckhard said the U.S. had hoped in late summer that Belarus would take steps toward respecting human rights and returning to democratic institutions but in fact, he commented, Minsk took "several steps back." According to Speckhard, the Belarusian government is not ready to follow the OSCE Minsk mission's advice on how to ensure a successful dialogue with the opposition. Moreover, Speckhard dismissed as "absolute nonsense" statements by Belarusian officials that the West financed the 17 October "freedom march," which ended in clashes with the police.(RFE/RL Newsline,25 October, 1999)

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCHDOG CALLS ON OSCE TO WITHDRAW INVITATION TO LUKASHENKA — The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) on 24 October said the state of human rights and democratic institutions in Belarus is "worsening by the day." The IHF called on the OSCE chairmanship to withdraw its invitation to Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to participate in the upcoming OSCE summit in Istanbul. It appealed to the OSCE to invite Syamyon Sharetski, chairman of the opposition Supreme Soviet, to represent Belarus at the summit. And it urged the OSCE "to review the legitimacy and constitutionality of the current government of Belarus" at the upcoming summit. (RFE/RL Newsline,25 October, 1999)

SHARETSKI APPEALS TO WEST, RUSSIA TO 'RESPECT' BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENCE. — Syamyon Sharetski, exiled chairman of the opposition Supreme Soviet, has sent a letter to U.S. President Bill Clinton, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Russian President Boris Yeltsin asking them "to respect the independence and sovereignty of Belarus," Belapan reported on 25 October. Sharetski referred to the memorandum on security guarantees to Belarus that the U.S., the U.K., and Russia signed in Budapest in 1994. The signatories pledged in that memorandum to respect Belarus's political independence. According to Sharetski, the recently published Belarus-Russia union treaty draft means the incorporation of Belarus into Russia in contravention of international law. (RFE/RL Newsline,26 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES TO PROSECUTE MORE PROTESTERS — The Belarusian authorities on 25 October announced that they have instituted criminal proceedings "in general" against participants in the opposition 17 October "freedom march," RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The authorities, however, have not specified how many people have been accused. They have so far jailed six people in connection with the 17 October protest, including Social Democratic Party leader Mikola Statkevich and Supreme Soviet deputy Valery Shchukin. Statkevich has been on a hunger strike since 17 October. Last week, the Minsk authorities banned a 31 October march organized by the opposition to commemorate the victims of the Stalinist terror in the 1930s and 1940s. (RFE/RL Newsline,26 October, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION SAYS REGIME VIOLATING OSCE RESOLUTION. — The opposition United Civic Party on 25 October accused the Belarusian authorities of violating the OSCE resolution on political dialogue in Belarus, which was adopted in St. Petersburg on 10 July. The party said the Belarusian regime pledged to the OSCE at that time to begin the process of democratizing the country's political life but has failed to keep that pledge. The party noted that the authorities have failed to give oppositionists access to the state-controlled media or to begin negotiations with them on future parliamentary elections. It also pointed out that since the OSCE resolution, the number of political prisoners has increased. (RFE/RL Newsline,26 October, 1999)

LUKASHENKA URGES RUSSIA TO QUICKLY SIGN UNION TREATY.. — Addressing the Russian State Duma on 27 October, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka urged Russia to quickly approve the treaty proposing a Belarusian-Russian union state. "If we delay any further, the people will lose their faith in the idea of a union state and the chance of carrying it out," Reuters quoted Lukashenka as saying. Lukashenka noted that the "fierce pressure of adversaries" of the Belarusian-Russian merger has exceeded "all conceivable bounds," according to ITAR-TASS. He criticized "individual Russian media" for presenting Belarus as a "wild [and] underdeveloped" country and a "communist preserve." After talks with Russian President Boris Yeltsin on 26 October, Lukashenka said that agreement has been reached to wrap up discussion of the draft union treaty by 20 November and to sign it "in early December," Interfax reported. (RFE/RL Newsline,27 October, 1999)

...ACCUSES 'ABROAD' OF SPONSORING BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION PROTEST — Speaking to Russian journalists in Moscow on 26 October, Lukashenka said the opposition "freedom march" in Minsk on 17 October was planned and sponsored "from abroad," Belarusian Television reported. He claimed that the Belarusian opposition received $300,000 through Belarusian NGOs as well as through "our so-called fascist independent media" to help stage the march. Lukashenka denied that riot police beat the protesters. "We did not beat anybody because we knew that [the demonstrators] need a feature [in television news]," he said. Lukashenka also said he has "reasons to say that the U.S. are exerting pressure not only on Belarus." He quoted Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev as saying "indignantly" at the CIS Customs Union summit in Moscow the same day that "the U.S. is interfering in domestic affairs."Lukashenka, however, did not specify in which countries' affairs the U.S. is interfering. (RFE/RL Newsline,27 October, 1999)

U.S. AMBASSADOR RESPONDS TO LUKASHENKA'S ANTI-AMERICAN STATEMENTS. — Daniel Speckhard, the U.S. ambassador to Belarus, said on 28 October that the Belarusian government is responsible for human rights abuses as well as for the country's "worsening relations with all Western countries and its self-imposed isolation," Belapan reported. Speckhard was responding to Lukashenka's comments at a CIS youth conference in Minsk the previous day in which he accused the U.S. of sucking money out of Russia and other former Soviet republics and of not respecting Belarusian traditions and "ancient civilization." Speaking of the U.S., Lukashenka had also commented "its history goes back [only] 300 years, when all of those riff-raff from Europe moved there." Speckhard said he is convinced that Belarusians will not fall for the Belarusian government's "Cold War tactics." He added that it is time for Belarus to join "the family of democratic nations," release "political detainees," and stop harassing opposition parties, NGOs, and the media.(RFE/RL Newsline, 29 October, 1999)

UKRAINE DISMISSES LUKASHENKA CRITICISM — President Leonid Kuchma's office on 27 October dismissed charges by Belarusian President Lukashenka that Kyiv is yielding to U.S. pressure, AP reported. Kuchma spokesman Oleksandr Martyenko said "the relations between the Ukraine and the U.S. are those of two civilized nations. Nobody has exerted any pressure [on anyone]." Lukashenka said in Moscow that Washington offered Kuchma financial support in exchange for a meeting between him and Belarusian opposition leader Syamyon Sharetski. Lukashenka said the secret meeting took place earlier this month, but Kuchma denies there was such a meeting. Lukashenka added that "Ukraine is looking to the West and aspires to join NATO. It is practically isolated from us and conducts pro-Western policies." (RFE/RL Newsline,29 October, 1999)

EXILED BELARUSIAN SPEAKER CALLS ON WEST TO PRESSURE MOSCOW — Syamyon Sharetski, the speaker of Belarus's dissolved Supreme Soviet, said in Copenhagen on 28 October that Western countries must pressure Russia to cease supporting Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, AP reported. Sharetski, who lives in exile in Lithuania, said that if a union between Belarus and Russia comes to fruition, Lukashenka will be elected president of the new entity. Commenting on the rousing reception Lukashenka received after an address to the Russian State Duma earlier this week (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 27 October 1999), Sharetski called the Belarusian president a "brilliant demagogue" whose populist message of "taking all from the rich and giving everything to the poor" resonates well in the Duma, most of whose members "want to reestablish the Soviet Union." Sharetski met with Danish officials in Copenhagen and said he is working on "getting Belarus back on track to democracy." (RFE/RL Newsline, 29 October, 1999)

LUKASHENKA WARNS OSCE AFTER ORGANIZATION CRITICIZES BELARUS — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 30 October warned the OSCE not to accuse his country of human rights violations at an official summit in Istanbul in November, Reuters reported, citing Interfax. Lukashenka was reported to have told the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's group for Belarus: "I warn those who try to depict Belarus as an outcast and prevent it from taking part in the summit. The response by the Belarusian side will be adequate." He did not elaborate. Adrian Severin, the head of the OSCE's group for Belarus, said after a meeting with Lukashenka that he is "deeply concerned over the marked deterioration of the human rights situation in Belarus" since the group's last visit in July. He added that he is disturbed that some of the people he spoke to during earlier visits "are now in prison..., in exile or in hiding, or have disappeared." (RFE/RL Newsline,1 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN POPULAR FRONT ELECTS NEW LEADER — The Belarusian Popular Front, the country's main opposition party, has elected Vintsuk Vyachorka as its new leader, AP reported on 30 October. Vyachorka replaces Zyanon Pazynak, who had held the post for more than a decade. Pazynak fled the country in 1996 and was granted political asylum in the U.S. Vyachorka said that "Lukashenka is ready to give up our independence, and we must resist not in theory but in practice." Vyachorka's election ends a leadership crisis in the party after a meeting in August resulted in a disputed and inconclusive vote.(RFE/RL Newsline,1 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION DEFIES BAN ON MARCHES — Some 200 members of Belarusian opposition parties on 31 October ignored a state ban on processions and marched to a Soviet-era execution site, AP reported. Several hundred other people joined the marchers at the Kuropaty mass grave just outside Minsk. Minsk city officials had banned the march this year. According to the opposition Belarus Popular Front, 10 people were arrested before the march began. As many as tens of thousands of people were killed at Kuropaty in Communist purges during the 1930s, according to some estimates.(RFE/RL Newsline,1 November, 1999)

BELARUS RELEASES ONE OPPOSITION LEADER, KEEPS ANOTHER DETAINED — Mikalay Statkevich, the leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party, was released from detention on 31 October, AP reported. Statkevich was arrested and charged with organizing mass demonstrations last month following clashes between police and protesters (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 18 October 1999). Statkevich said

he was let go only after signing an agreement not to leave the country. He added that he was freed "because of the growing international solidarity for [the] liberation of political prisoners in Belarus." In other news, Belapan reported on 1 November that the pre-trial detention of former Belarusian Premier Mikhail Chyhir has been extended for one month. Chyhir, a candidate in the opposition's parallel presidential election in May, was arrested in April. He is now awaiting trial on charges of abuse of power and criminal negligence. (RFE/RL Newsline, 1 November, 1999)

INTERNATIONAL AGENCY PLEDGES MORE CHORNOBYL AID TO BELARUS. — The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) pledged on 31 October to increase its aid to Belarus for alleviating problems from the Chornobyl nuclear disaster, Reuters reported. Jihui Qian, the IAEA vice president, said "Belarus badly needs our assistance...there is nothing more important [here] than combating the consequences" of the disaster. Jihui made his announcement after a tour of the most affected areas. Some 25 percent of the country remains affected by radiation released in the 1986 explosion. The IAEA is involved in two programs in Belarus, one aimed at reducing radiation in homes and property, the other providing funds for the construction of a plant in the south that would produce safe cooking oil. (RFE/RL Newsline, 1 November, 1999)

UNION TREATY DRAFT APPROVED BY BELARUSIAN PARLIAMENTARY CHAMBER — The lower house of the Belarusian National Assembly unanimously passed a draft treaty on a union between Russia and Belarus, Reuters reported. Leonyd Kozyk, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's representative for the union with Russia, said before the vote that "the union treaty...is a new stage in our relations with Russia, creating the basis for integration." Kozyk said, however, that Belarus is disappointed by the sluggish pace of integration and that differences remain in customs regulations and trade levies. He added that Russia still refuses to provide Belarus with oil and gas at "domestic" prices. And he noted that Belarusian citizens have been active in the discussion of the draft treaty, although he did not say how. (RFE/RL Newsline,3 November, 1999)

EU CONCERNED WITH BELARUSIAN RIGHTS RECORD — An EU mission on a visit to Minsk said on 2 November that it is "concerned about the overall unsatisfactory record of human rights in Belarus," dpa reported. EU delegation head Rene Nyberg said "the inability of the authorities to shed light on disappeared [members of the opposition] is of particular concern." Hugues Mingarelli, the European Commission service head, said "our common objective is a free and just 2000 election." The EU also announced that Belarus has agreed to accept EU funding to support free media and independent unions. It is the first major agreement between the EU and Belarus since Brussels curbed cooperation with Minsk two years ago on account of its human rights record. The EU program earmarks $5.5 million for media and unions in Belarus. (RFE/RL Newsline,3 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION TO BE ALLOWED ACCESS TO STATE MEDIA? — Representatives of the government and the opposition on 3 November discussed "technical details" of the opposition's access to the state-controlled electronic media in the run-up to the planned OSCE-mediated talks on free parliamentary elections in 2000. According to Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarusian Service, the opposition will be allowed to present its pre-recorded videos four times a week in two analytical programs on national television and will receive up to 90 seconds of coverage every day in the television's main newscast. The agreement on the opposition's access to the state media is expected to be signed next week. (RFE/RL Newsline,4 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES TO RESTORE LICENSES TO INDEPENDENT PRESS? — State Press Committee Chairman Mikhail Padhayny on 3 November promised chief editors of the seven independent newspapers and magazines whose licenses were revoked in early October that the committee will "resolve" the issue of their re-registration in a week, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. In particular, Padhayny admitted that the authorities were "unjust" in canceling the registration of *Nasha svaboda* — a publication that was to have succeeded *Naviny* after the authorities closed down the latter — and *Kuryer*, a magazine registered by *Naviny* former chief editor Ihar Hermyanchuk. Hermyanchuk told RFE/RL that the authorities have begun to ease their pressure on the independent press in Belarus most likely because Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's is seeking to avoid criticism at the OSCE summit in Istanbul later this month. (RFE/RL Newsline,4 November, 1999)

VODKA PRICE AGAIN INCREASES IN BELARUS — The price of Belarusian-made vodka increased by 25 percent on 3 November, Belapan reported. It was the eighth such hike this year. Since January, the price of vodka has gone by 180 percent in Belarus. Rumors about the latest hike caused a vodka shortage in Minsk in late October. (RFE/RL Newsline,4 November, 1999)

IMF MISSION URGES BELARUS TO TAKE MORE LIBERAL STEPS — An IMF mission headed by Thomas Wolf has concluded a two-week stay in Belarus to assess that country's economic prospects, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 4 November. In particular, the mission examined the government's plan to liberalize its monetary policy in 2000. While praising the government's intent, Wolf told journalists that Belarus should "go further" in liberalizing its hard currency market and prices as well as expanding privatization and launching agricultural reform. The IMF has not commented on Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's remark in the Russian State Duma last week that Russia's economic woes result from the country's cooperation with "those crooks from the IMF."(RFE/RL Newsline,5 November, 1999)

RUSSIAN OMBUDSMAN SAYS NO HUMAN RIGHTS PROBLEMS IN BELARUS — Oleg Mironov said in Minsk on 9 November that there are no problems with human rights in Belarus, Belarusian Television reported. According to Mironov, Belarus meets world standards with regard to the independence of the judiciary, while "in terms of some other [human rights] indicators, [the situation in Belarus] is even better than in Russia." Following his meeting with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka the same day, Mironov noted that one of the aims of his visit to Minsk is "to shatter a myth about large-scale violations of human rights and freedoms in Belarus." He added that Lukashenka invited him to extend his activities to Belarus until the country enacts a law on the institution of ombudsman.(RFE/RL Newsline, 10 November, 1999)

U.S. AMBASSADOR CALLS ON BELARUS TO 'BREAK DOWN BARRIERS.' — In a statement issued on the 10th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Daniel Speckhard said that Belarus is much closer to the rest of Europe than many other CIS countries, Belapan reported. Speckhard noted, however, that it will not benefit from this until it "breaks down barriers that hampers its economic and democratic development." The ambassador added that "as Belarus tears down the remaining walls, the United States will be ready to forge new and enduring ties between our people, societies, and economies."(RFE/RL Newsline, 10 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES FREE PROMINENT AGRICULTURAL MANAGER — The authorities on 11 November released 75-year-old Vasil Staravoytau from a prison in Orsha, where he had served a two-year sentence for embezzlement, attempted smuggling, abuse of power, bribery, and illegal weapons possession. Staravoytau had denied most of the charges, pleading guilty only to minor offenses. A World War II veteran, he received some of the Soviet Union's highest honors, including three Orders of Lenin and two Hero of Socialist Labor awards, and introduced free-market mechanisms on the collective farm he managed in Mahileu Oblast. Some Belarusian independent media had speculated that by jailing Staravoytau, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, a former collective farm manager, took revenge on his more successful rival in farming. Others had asserted that the case of Staravoytau was intended to intimidate other agricultural leaders and stifle trends for reform in the countryside. "This is a disgrace for the regime," Staravoytau told journalists after his release, commenting on his imprisonment. (RFE/RL Newsline, 12 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN ARTIST TO BE TRIED FOR 'MALICIOUS HOOLIGANISM.' — Belarusian painter Ales Pushkin on 11 November was indicted on charges of "malicious hooliganism with particular [degree of] cynicism" and of "profaning state symbols," RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. His trial will begin on 24 November. Pushkin was detained by police on 21 July when he marked the end of President Lukashenka's legitimate term in office by dumping a wheelbarrow of manure along with Lukashenka's portrait, state symbols, and Belarusian banknotes in front of the presidential office, saying his action was intended to thank the president "for five years of fruitful work." Pushkin says he is not guilty, arguing that his action was an artistic performance. He told journalists that he will request an expert evaluation of his performance be included in the trial. (RFE/RL Newsline, 12 November, 1999)

MINSK POLICE DENY BEATING OF 'FREEDOM MARCH' PARTICIPANTS. — The Minsk-based Association for Legal Assistance to the Population has received an official reply to its complaint about the police brutality during the 17 October opposition "freedom march," Belapan reported on 12 November. The association had collected and handed to the police the results of medical examinations of 20 people who were beaten by riot policemen after their arrests on 17 October. "The citizens in question were arrested for violating street demonstration regulations. There is no evidence that [riot police] officers used brutal force," Belapan quoted the Minsk Main Internal Affairs Directorate as saying. (RFE/RL Newsline, 15 November, 1999)

OSCE MISSION SAYS HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN BELARUS UNSATISFACTORY — Hans-Peter Kleiner, deputy head of the OSCE Consultative and Monitoring group in Minsk, said on 12 October that the human rights situation in Belarus is unsatisfactory. Kleiner said that is not only because police beat demonstrators but also because the state-controlled media do not report on human rights violations. Meanwhile, Russia's Commissioner for Human Rights Oleg Mironov, who visited Belarus from 8-11 November, failed to meet with the country's leading human rights organizations such as Spring-96, Charter-97, and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee. Mironov, however, met with Yauhen Novikau, head of the Belarusian National League for Human Rights. Novikau told Belapan on 12 November that the human rights situation in Belarus was worse before President Alyaksandr Lukashenka came to power than it is now. (RFE/RL Newsline, 15 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT REJECTS ACCORD ON OPPOSITION ACCESS TO MEDIA — Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 15 November rejected a protocol granting the opposition limited access to the state-controlled media. That document was signed earlier this month by the president's representatives and oppositionists (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 4 November 1999), Belarusian Television reported. Under the protocol, the opposition would have been allowed to show prerecorded videos on state television. According to Lukashenka, the protocol contravenes "all civilized and democratic norms" because it allows the opposition "to introduce its censorship in the state media," while depriving journalists of their "authorship right." Belapan reported the same day that opposition and government experts agreed to resume consultations on access to the media after the 18-19 November OSCE summit in Istanbul. (RFE/RL Newsline, 16 November, 1999)

BELARUS-RUSSIA UNION TREATY TO BE SIGNED ON 26 NOVEMBER? — Mikhail Myasnikovich, head of the Belarusian presidential staff, told Interfax on 15 November that the signing of a treaty establishing the union state of Belarus and Russia will take place in the Kremlin at noon on 26 November. According to Myasnikovich, the signing ceremony will be preceded by a "face-to-face meeting" between Lukashenka and Russian President Boris Yeltsin and will be followed by a session of the Higher Council of the Belarusian-Russian Union. (RFE/RL Newsline, 16 November, 1999)

LUKASHENKA SAYS BELARUS TO REMAIN INDEPENDENT IN UNION WITH RUSSIA — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 16 November said Belarus's sovereignty and independence will remain "inflexible and unshakable" in the planned union state with Russia, Belarusian Television reported. "There will be no question of our joining Russia as six [separate] oblasts or any other state as the whole republic," Lukashenka said. He noted that Belarus will accept only "equal conditions" and a "civilized method" of integration with Russia, adding that there is no alternative to the process of integration. (RFE/RL Newsline, 17 November, 1999)

BELARUS-RUSSIA UNION TREATY AMENDED, BUT NOT CHANGED — Belarusian presidential staff chief Mikhail Myasnikovich told Interfax on 16 November that Belarus and Russia have found an "optimal variant" of the union state treaty that is to be signed in Moscow on 26 November. However, Myasnikovich noted that the treaty calls for "setting up a union state" and does not envisage the integration of Belarus and Russia into a single state. Myasnikovich added that during the public debate of the treaty draft, more than 1,300 proposals were made on how to improve the draft; as a result, some 500 amendments were introduced into the document. Meanwhile, Lukashenka's aide Mikhail Sazonau said 99 percent of all amendments are "purely technical" and do not change the nature of the functions or powers of the union bodies as stated in the draft. (RFE/RL Newsline, 17 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN LEGISLATURE GIVES INITIAL APPROVAL TO ELECTION CODE — The Chamber of Representatives on 17 November passed in the first reading an election code that Central Electoral Commission Chairwoman Lidziya Yarmoshyna described as securing "the equality of candidates irrespective of their material situation and official status," Interfax reported. Belarusian lawmakers, however, rejected many amendments to the code submitted by the Minsk OSCE mission. The Belarusian opposition, for its part, submitted no proposals, saying it is waiting for OSCE-mediated talks with the authorities on free parliamentary elections in 2000 to begin. Meanwhile, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported that the second reading of the code will likely be postponed until the spring. An RFE/RL Minsk correspondent said it is rumored that the authorities want to hold parlia-

mentary elections in the fall of 2000, after Russia has elected a new president.(RFE/RL Newsline, 18 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN BUSINESSMEN URGED TO MAKE DONATIONS FOR GRAIN IMPORTS — Three Minsk organizations of entrepreneurs have called on local business-people to donate money to the city authorities for grain imports, Belapan reported on 17 November. The organizers of the money-raising campaign note that this year's poor harvest has caused "difficulties in supplying Minsk residents with bread products." They point out that the campaign "will improve the image of entrepreneurs and uphold the traditions of charity and patronage." In a widely quoted statement, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka once called private businessmen and entrepreneurs in Belarus "lousy fleas."(RFE/RL Newsline, 18 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST ARRESTED — Police on 18 November arrested Ales Byalatski, leader of the human rights organization Spring-96, Belapan reported. Byalatski was reportedly asked to come to a Minsk district police department to pick up computers that had been confiscated from his organization in early October. He was arrested, however, and told he will stand trial the next day as one of the organizers of the 17 October opposition "freedom march."(RFE/RL Newsline, 19 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION TO STAGE PROTEST ON 24 NOVEMBER — The Minsk city authorities have refused permission for the opposition to stage a "chain of freedom" along Minsk's central avenue on 24 November. They said the action may be held only on a square on the outskirts of the city. The Coordination Council of Democratic Forces--which unites several opposition parties and NGOs--decided on 18 November to drop the idea of a "chain of freedom" and observe instead an "hour of sorrow and solidarity" on 24 November. It is expected that some 2,000 people holding candles will stand along Minsk's central avenue to commemorate victims of the Soviet regime and express solidarity with prisoners of Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime. The council adopted an appeal to the Minsk police "not to organize provocations against participants in the peaceful action."(RFE/RL Newsline, 19 November, 1999)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT SCOLDS POLAND, LITHUANIA OVER HUMAN RIGHTS — Speaking at the OSCE Istanbul summit on 19 November, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka advised his Polish and Lithuanian counterparts, Aleksander Kwasniewski and Valdas Adamkus, to mind their own business instead of "poking their noses into someone else's garden." Lukashenka was responding to both president's remarks the previous day that the OSCE needs to pay attention to violations of human rights in Belarus. Lukashenka said Poland's government itself violates human rights by "beating workers and peasants on a mass scale." And Lukashenka accused Lithuania of having political prisoners, "old people who today do not pose a threat either to Europe or to [Lithuania]." (RFE/RL Newsline, 22 November, 1999)

YELTSIN THANKS LUKASHENKA FOR SUPPORT TO RUSSIA OVER CHECHNYA — Quoting official sources, Belapan reported on 21 November that Russian President Boris Yeltsin called Lukashenka the previous day to thank him for supporting Russia's stance on Chechnya at the OSCE summit in Istanbul. Lukashenka had said that the OSCE countries "are obliged if not to support the Russian people then at least to understand the Russians" over their military action in Chechnya. Yeltsin officially invited Lukashenka to visit Moscow on 26 November, when both politicians are expected to sign a treaty establishing the Belarus-Russia union state. (RFE/RL Newsline, 22 November, 1999)

OSCE WANTS DIALOGUE IN BELARUS TO YIELD RESULTS BY APRIL 2000 — Hans Georg Wieck, head of the OSCE Consultative and Monitoring Group in Belarus, told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on 22 November that his organization wants the talks between the government and the opposition to result in agreement on an electoral code. According to Wieck, the authorities cannot adopt this code without the participation of the opposition if the 2000 parliamentary elections are to be recognized as free and fair. Wieck added that the Belarusian legislature, which has adopted the code in the first reading (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 18 November 1999), has declined to consider many amendments suggested by the OSCE. He added that the dialogue in Belarus must yield results by April 2000 at the latest if the authorities want to remain true to their pledge to hold democratic elections next year.(RFE/RL Newsline, 23 November, 1999)

BELARUS TO ENTER EUROPE VIA RUSSIA? — Belarusian Foreign Minister Ural Latypau told journalists on 22 November that Belarus will march into Europe through rapprochement with Russia, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. According to Latypau, there is no contradiction between the Belarusian Constitution's proclaiming the country's neutrality and the creation of a union state with Russia, since, he argued, neutrality is not Belarus's "end in itself." Latypau added that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, following his return from the OSCE Istanbul summit, ordered the Foreign Ministry to "normalize" relations with the U.S. (RFE/RL Newsline, 23 November, 1999)

VALUE OF AVERAGE WAGE IN BELARUS DROPS — The average wage fell from the equivalent of $46 (according to the street exchange rate) in September to $41 last month, Belapan reported on 22 November. This 11 percent drop occurred despite the fact that the average wage in rubles increased by 18.8 percent last month compared with September. During this period, the street exchange rate of the ruble fell by 32.6 percent.(RFE/RL Newsline, 23 November, 1999)

CLINTON DID NOT MEET LUKASHENKA AT OSCE SUMMIT — A U.S. State Department official told RFE/RL's Belarusian Service on 23 November that U.S. President Bill Clinton did not have a formal meeting with Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka at the OSCE summit in Istanbul last week. "As President Clinton was leaving the final signing ceremony, Lukashenka stepped in front of him with his hand extended. Out of courtesy the president shook it. Lukashenka invited the president to visit Belarusian capital Minsk. The president responded that he had already been there. There was no further discussion," the U.S. official said. In a bid to inflate Lukashenka's political clout, Belarusian Television reported on 19 November that he had a meeting with Clinton in Istanbul. And Foreign Minister Ural Latypau told journalists on 22 November that Lukashenka had two meetings with Clinton in Istanbul. (RFE/RL Newsline, 24 November, 1999)

BELARUS TO INCREASE PENSIONS IN DECEMBER — The Belarusian government will raise pensions by an average of 15.2 percent beginning 1 December, Belapan reported on 23 November. The minimum pension will be the equivalent of $6.8, the average pension $17.7, and the maximum pension $29.3 (according to the street exchange rate).(RFE/RL Newsline, 24 November, 1999)

BELARUSIANS PROTEST OPPRESSION, UNION WITH RUSSIA — Some 1,500 people stood in single file holding candles on Minsk's main avenue on 24 November to express solidarity with political prisoners and protest the planned union with Russia, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The action, called "The Hour of Sorrow and

Solidarity," took place on the third anniversary of the 1996 controversial referendum, which expanded Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's powers and extended his presidential term until 2001. "I am here to show people that we are against the unification with Russia..., [by means of which] we are again being driven into those barracks, into a big kolkhoz," one participant in the protest told RFE/RL. Police detained six people. Similar protests, albeit on a smaller scale, took place in Hrodna and Brest. [RFE/RL Newsline,29 November, 1999]

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST DELIGHTED ABOUT DELAYED SIGNING OF UNION TREATY — Vintsuk Vyachorka, chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front, told Reuters on 25 November that he feels "sheer joy" over the postponement of the signing of the Belarus-Russia union state treaty, which had been scheduled for the following day. Vyachorka suggested that Russian President Boris Yeltsin's illness may be a pretext for preventing the current Russian State Duma, whose term concludes next month, from ratifying the treaty. "I believe modern medicine would be able to keep [Yeltsin] on his feet for such an event. This is a slap in the face of Lukashenka, even if Yeltsin is really ill," Vyachorka commented. Meanwhile, Lukashenka's economic aide Pyotr Kapitula commented that "knowing the [Belarusian] president's ideals and his drive for integration, I think he will be disappointed" over the postponement. [RFE/RL Newsline,29 November, 1999]

BELARUSIAN ARTIST RECEIVES SUSPENDED TERM FOR 'MALICIOUS HOOLIGANISM.' — Ales Pushkin has been given a two-year suspended prison sentence for his 21 July action to mark the end of Lukashenka's legitimate term in office (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 12 November 1999). According to Belapan on 25 November, the court found Pushkin guilty of "malicious hooliganism perpetrated with exceptional cynicism and [through] the profanation of state symbols." Pushkin had dumped a wheelbarrow of manure along with a portrait of Lukashenka, a state flag, and Belarusian banknotes impaled on a pitchfork in front of the presidential administration building. Both Pushkin and an art critic had argued that the action was not "malicious hooliganism" but an artistic performance that symbolized the situation of Belarus after Lukashenka's five years in office. [RFE/RL Newsline,29 November, 1999]

BELARUS HALVES ENERGY DEBT — Prime Minister Syarhey Linh on 29 November announced that Belarus has decreased its debt for energy resources by 50 percent, Interfax reported. According to Linh, the country's debt for oil shrank from $100 million to $50 million, for electricity from $80 million to $40 million, and for gas from $236 million to $160 million. The agency did not specify the period over which the debt was reduced.[RFE/RL Newsline, 30 November, 1999]

LUKASHENKA WANTS UNION TREATY SIGNED BEFORE CURRENT DUMA ENDS TERM — "It is important for me that the signing [of the Belarus-Russia union state treaty] takes place on 7 December, because in this case the document will still have a chance of being ratified by the present State Duma," Belarusian President Lukashenka said on Russian National Television on 28 November, according to Interfax. Lukashenka was speaking before the news that Russian President Boris Yeltsin was taken to the hospital with suspected pneumonia. The previous day, deputies of the opposition Belarusian Supreme Soviet passed a resolution declaring the union treaty illegitimate. They noted that Lukashenka's legitimate term expired on 21 July 1999, while the treaty itself contradicts the Belarusian Constitution. [RFE/RL Newsline, 30 November, 1999]

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST FREED AFTER EIGHT MONTHS IN PRISON — Former Premier Mikhail Chyhir, who ran in the opposition presidential ballot in May, was freed on 30 November after eight months in prison. However, Chyhir still faces trial for negligence and abuse of power resulting in losses to the state totaling $4.1 million, according to Belarusian Television. The authorities, however, have dropped the initial charge of grand larceny brought against him. Chyhir told journalists that he is not guilty of those charges and hopes the court will acquit him. He added that he is not going to leave either Belarus or politics. Chyhir thanked the Belarusian opposition as well as European democracies and the U.S. which, he said, "fought for his release," RFE/RL'S Belarusian Service reported.[RFE/RL Newsline,1 December, 1999]

BELARUS HAS NEARLY 2,000 LOSS-MAKING ENTERPRISES — Deputy Economy Minister Andrey Tur said there were 1, 961 loss-making enterprises in Belarus in January-September 1999, which is equal to 17.5 percent of the total number, Belapan reported on 30 November. He added that their losses totaled 31.5 trillion Belarusian rubles (some $100 million according to the official exchange rate). Most loss-making enterprises are in the agricultural sector, where they make up 35.5 percent of all agricultural enterprises and farms.[RFE/RL Newsline,1 December, 1999]

BELARUSIAN ECONOMY CATEGORIZED AS 'REPRESSED.' — In their latest "Index of Economic Freedom," the U.S.'s Heritage Foundation and "The Wall Street Journal" ranked Belarus as 145th among 161 countries listed in descending order. The index categorized the Belarusian economy as "repressed" and noted that "despite limited steps to liberalize the economy in 1994-95, by the second half of 1995, macroeconomic policies were again relaxed and structural reforms came to a virtual standstill or were reversed." It also commented that in 1996 the Belarusian authorities reverted to a policy of "credit expansion," simultaneously introducing a "pervasive system of price controls." [RFE/RL Newsline,2 December, 1999]

U.S. URGES BELARUS TO FREE ALL POLITICAL PRISONERS — State Department spokesman James Rubin on 2 December welcomed the release of Belarusian oppositionist and former Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir, whom he said had been arrested on politically based charges. Rubin urged the Belarusian government "to drop all charges leveled against Chyhir, release other political detainees, and account for disappeared opposition figures." The same day, Belarusian Television reported that Chyhir will stand trial for negligence and abuse of power, which reportedly caused losses to the state totaling more than $4 million. According to Belapan, OSCE representative Adrian Severin, who is to visit Belarus on 11 December, will urge the Belarusian authorities to ensure that Chyhir's trial is an open one. [RFE/RL Newsline,3 December, 1999]

NEW BELARUSIAN MOVEMENT TO SEEK DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS. — Some 120 delegates from throughout Belarus took part in the constituent congress in Minsk on 4 December of a Movement for Democratic and Free Elections, Belapan reported. The movement's declared goals are to promote civil society and to ensure that free and democratic elections are held in Belarus. The congress elected Mechaslau Hryb, former speaker of the Supreme Soviet, as chairman of the new group. [RFE/RL Newsline,6 December, 1999]

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATOR DISMISSED. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has dismissed Ivan Tsitsyankou, head of the Presidential Administrative Department, at the latter's request, Belarusian

Television reported on 3 December without any further comment. Tsitsyankou was widely believed to be one of the most influential officials in Belarus and one of Lukashenka's closest associates. Belarusian independent press repeatedly suggested that Tsitsyankou was involved in shady economic operations, building his department into an "empire" of handicraft industries, health and vacation resorts, national parks, and hundreds of buildings available for rent. "I think this is the first of a series of forthcoming dismissals," Mikhail Chyhir, former premier in Lukashenka's administration, commented to Belapan. Chyhir added that the Presidential Administrative Department enjoyed some economic privileges and "reaped huge profits from the multiplicity of exchange rates" in Belarus. [RFE/RL Newsline,6 December, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OFFICIAL FOR CONTACTS WITH OPPOSITION REPORTEDLY RESIGNS — Interfax reported on 6 December that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's aide, Mikhail Sazonau, who was charged with preparing a dialogue with the opposition, has resigned. Official sources have not confirmed that report. In November, Sazonau, together with opposition experts, drew up a document regulating the opposition's access to the state-controlled media. However, Lukashenka rejected that document, and the preparations for the OSCE-mediated dialogue in Belarus came to a standstill. According to Belapan, Lukashenka's chief of protocol, Uladzimir Karalou, and Belarusian Broadcasting Company Chairman Ryhor Kisel have also tendered their resignations. [RFE/RL Newsline,7 December, 1999)

RUSSIA, BELARUS SIGN UNION TREATY... — Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his Belarusian counterpart, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, on 8 December signed the treaty on the union of the two countries. The treaty, which follows a number of documents on the countries' union, calls for the creation of a Higher Council, comprising the presidents, prime ministers, and speakers of the legislatures of both countries, to coordinate policies. It also calls for the creation of a single currency and uniform tax policy by 2005 and a joint military doctrine by next year, according to Reuters and Interfax. President Lukashenka, who earlier said the treaty would barely change the status quo, hailed the establishment of the union "as a moral triumph of justice." President Yeltsin noted that the "union is based on the sovereignty and independence of member nations and is not directed against anyone not even against [U.S. President] Clinton." [RFE/RL Newsline,8 December, 1999)

BELARUSIAN ORGANIZATIONS ORDERED TO AMEND NAMES — An amendment to Belarus's law on public associations, which went into force on 7 December, prohibits Belarusian political and social organizations from using the words "Belarus," "Republic of Belarus," "national," and "popular" in their names. The Justice Ministry told Belapan the same day that the organizations that have banned words in their names should "bring their names into line with the new legislation" within a month. [RFE/RL Newsline,8 December, 1999)

CZECH REPUBLIC TO SELL WHEAT TO BELARUS ON CREDIT — The Czech Export Bank will provide a credit of $60 million to Belarus's Belvneshekonombank for the purchase of 140 trainloads of Czech wheat, "Lidove noviny" reported on 8 December. The repayment of that credit is guaranteed by the Belarusian government. Czech Agricultural Minister Jan Fencl said the deal is "very advantageous" for his country. "Lidove noviny" quoted Belarusian oppositionists as saying that the deal will help Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka quell imminent protests by Belarusians faced with mounting poverty and will reinforce his regime. Belarusian independent media formerly reported that because of this year's poor harvest, Minsk is also seeking to purchase grain from Poland. [RFE/RL Newsline,8 December, 1999)

KUCHMA WARNS RUSSIA OF 'GREAT LOSSES' IN UNION WITH BELARUS — In an interview with the 7 December "Le Monde," Kuchma said Ukraine is not going to join the Belarus-Russia Union. "We are not playing that game," he added. While noting that both Belarusians and Russians have the "sovereign right to unite," he said that Russia "will suffer great losses from this union." [RFE/RL Newsline,8 December, 1999)

BELARUS-RUSSIA TREATY SPARKS MINOR PROTESTS IN MINSK... — Two small demonstrations took place in Minsk on 8 December to protest the signing of the treaty on the Belarus-Russia union state, Belapan reported. Some 40 people carrying placards with anti-merger slogans tried to block Minsk's main avenue early that day, while some 250 people marched down the main avenue in the evening and burned the Russian flag. Both rallies were dispersed by riot police, which reportedly arrested Belarusian Popular Front deputy chairman Vyachaslau Siuchyk and some 15 protesters. [RFE/RL Newsline,9 December, 1999)

...AND VERBAL CONDEMNATION FROM OPPOSITION — Syamyon Sharetski, exiled speaker of the opposition Supreme Soviet, said in Vilnius on 8 December that the Belarus-Russia union state treaty will meet the fate of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact after democracy is restored in Belarus. Zyanon Paznyak, exiled leader of the Belarusian Popular Front, said the treaty is "an act of aggression and the political occupation" of Belarus by Russia. Former Supreme Soviet Chairman Stanislau Shushkevich commented that by signing the treaty, Belarus President Alyaksandr Lukashenka made "a payoff to Russia to keep him in power, as it was Russia which helped him usurp the power." The Belarusian opposition deems the treaty illegal as it was signed by a president whose term expired earlier this year. [RFE/RL Newsline,9 December, 1999)

NEIGHBORS HAVE MIXED REACTIONS TO BELARUS-RUSSIA TREATY... — Ukrainian parliamentary speaker Oleksandr Tkachenko said on 8 December that Ukraine's accession to the Belarus-Russia union is a "matter of time," adding that Ukraine may join the treaty "in three years at most." President Leonid Kuchma commented in Washington the same day that Ukraine has already made its choice and "will proceed on the path of independence." The Polish Foreign Ministry said Poland does not consider the Belarus-Russia union a threat and will not treat the union as a "new subject of international law." Lithuanian parliamentary speaker Vytautas Landsbergis said the Belarus-Russia treaty is a "challenge [that] sharpens the international situation," according to ELTA. [RFE/RL Newsline,9 December, 1999)

...WHILE U.S. DOUBTFUL ABOUT BELARUS'S VOLUNTARY MERGER WITH RUSSIA. — U.S. State Department spokesman James Foley said on 8 December that the U.S. does not oppose integration among European countries "as long as it is mutually beneficial...and voluntary." Foley noted, however, that "there is no democratic process in Belarus, therefore it's impossible to conclude that the decisions on the union treaty with Russia reflect the will of the Belarusian people or that they are voluntary in nature." Foley added that he is unsure whether the treaty signed by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Lukashenka on 8 December will meet "Mr. Lukashenka's fondest aims and desires." [RFE/RL Newsline,9 December, 1999)

BELARUSIAN LEGISLATURE TO RATIFY UNION TREATY ON 14 DECEMBER — Anatol Malafeyeu, chairman of the Belarusian Chamber of Representatives, said on 9 Decem-

ber that the Belarusian legislature will debate ratification of the Belarus-Russia union state treaty on 14 December, Belapan reported. The Russian State Duma is expected to ratify the treaty one day earlier. [RFE/RL Newsline, 10 December, 1999)

BELARUSIANS PROTEST HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS, UNION WITH RUSSIA — Some 200 people gathered outside the presidential administration building, which was cordoned off by police, on 10 December to deliver petitions demanding respect for human rights in Belarus and protesting the union with Russia, Belapan reported. Several protesters were eventually let into the building to hand the petitions to an official. "What human rights can we speak of? We have no rights and are hardly even human beings," Reuters quoted one protestor as saying. [RFE/RL Newsline, 13 December, 1999)

BELARUSIAN LEGISLATURE RATIFIES BELARUS-RUSSIA TREATY — The Chamber of Representatives, the 110-seat lower house hand-picked by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka following the controversial constitutional referendum in 1996, ratified on 14 December the Belarusian-Russian treaty on the creation of a union state. The accord, signed by the Russian and Belarusian presidents on 8 December in the Kremlin, was backed by 101 legislators and opposed by one, ITAR-TASS reported. [RFE/RL Newsline, 14 December, 1999)

MISSING BELARUSIAN FORMER CHIEF BANKER REAPPEARS — Former National Bank Chairwoman Tamara Vinnikava, who disappeared while under house arrest in Minsk in April, telephoned with a *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta* editor on 10 December to say that she is now safe abroad. In an interview published in the 13 December issue of the newspaper, Vinnikava said "I was to die, and only chance and the will of the Almighty helped me avoid the fate prepared for me by the authorities." She added that she knows what happened to several prominent oppositionists who disappeared in recent months, but she refused to provide details. Vinnikava was arrested in January 1997 on charges of abuse of power and embezzlement. She spent 10 months in a KGB prison and was subsequently placed under house arrest. No formal charges have been brought against her. [RFE/RL Newsline, 14 December, 1999)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST BEATEN IN PRISON — Andrej Klimau, a deputy of the opposition Supreme Soviet was badly beaten in prison on 13 December after he had refused to go to court, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. Klimau was brought to the court in torn clothes and without shoes, where doctors found many injuries on his stomach and head and urged that he be immediately taken to hospital. The judge, however, ordered that he be taken back to prison. Klimau was arrested in January 1998 and is now on trial on charges of grand larceny. [RFE/RL Newsline, 14 December, 1999)

BELARUS LIBERALIZES HARD CURRENCY MARKET — The National Bank on 14 December allowed commercial banks to introduce free hard-currency exchange rates. The same day, currency exchange booths in Minsk offered 720,000 Belarusian rubles for $1 and sold $1 for 730,000 Belarusian rubles, virtually the same rates as on the black market. The National Bank also lifted its restriction ordering commercial banks to sell 70-95 percent of their hard currency to the state. It is unclear whether the Central Bank will revoke the hard currency market liberalization after several weeks. Former National Bank Chairman Stanislau Bahdankevich commented to Belapan that the authorities failed to regulate the hard currency market by means of administrative measures, therefore the liberalization will be in place "for a long time." [RFE/RL Newsline, 15 December, 1999)

OSCE CONCERNED BY REPORTED BEATING OF BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST — The OSCE on 14 December issued a statement expressing concern over the reported beating in jail of Andrej Klimau, a deputy of the opposition Supreme Soviet (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 14 December 1999), Reuters reported. The OSCE urged the Belarusian government to investigate the incident, provide immediate medical treatment in a suitable hospital for Klimau, and release him from pre-trial detention. The authorities denied that Klimau was beaten. Adrian Severin, OSCE special envoy to Belarus, said in Minsk the same day that he regards the beating of Klimau as a "personal insult" as he is seeking to organize a dialogue between the government and the opposition in Belarus, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. [RFE/RL Newsline, 15 December, 1999)

BELARUS TO CRACK DOWN ON MIDDLEMEN — Alyaksandr President Lukashenka on 15 December said he will issue an edict regulating the role and number of middlemen in the country's economy, Belarusian Television reported. According to Lukashenka, there are too many middlemen in Belarus and their activities result in unjustified hikes in the prices of domestic products and the "undeserved fortunes of hundreds of thousands of people." Alyaksandr Patupa, head of the Belarusian Union of Entrepreneurs, commented that Lukashenka intends to restore "market socialism" where "trade is fully replaced with distribution, while the state performs the role of a universal middleman and distributor," according to Belapan. [RFE/RL Newsline, 16 December, 1999)

BELARUS PUBLISHES PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF 1999 CENSUS — According to the census held in February 1999, Belarus is inhabited by 10.045 million people, down 107,000 from the previous census in 1989, Belapan reported on 15 December, citing the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis. City residents constitute 69 percent of the population. Belarusians make up 81.2 percent of the population, Russians 11.4 percent, Poles 3.9 percent, Ukrainians 2.9 percent, Jews 0.3 percent, and others 0.8 percent. Belarusian is spoken at home by 36.7 percent of the population and Russian by 62.8 percent. [RFE/RL Newsline, 16 December, 1999)

BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENT TRADE UNIONISTS ARRESTED — Police on 16 December arrested Mikhail Marynich, leader of the Free Trade Union, and six other independent trade union activists, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported. The arrest took place at the Minsk Automotive Plant, where some 1,000 workers were holding a meeting to protest the plant administration's decision last week to confiscate trade-union property and documents. Marynich, who was injured while being arrested and taken to the hospital, was released in the evening, while the fate of the other six trade unionists is unknown. [RFE/RL Newsline, 17 December, 1999)

BELARUS TO PUNISH ACTIVISTS OF UNREGISTERED ORGANIZATIONS — Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 17 December signed a bill introducing punishments for activity on behalf of organizations that are not registered by the Justice Ministry, Belapan reported. Those guilty of such offenses will be fined 10 to 50 minimum wages; a repeated offense will entail fines of 50 to 100 minimum wages or up to 15 days in jail. The bill also prohibits the Belarusian media from disseminating information issued by non-registered organizations. The minimum wage in Belarus currently stands at 1.45 million Belarusian rubles ($2). [RFE/RL Newsline, 20 December, 1999)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT DECREES ECONOMIC INDICATORS FOR 2000 — Alyaksandr Lukashenka has approved the basic target figures for Belarus's socioeconomic development in 2000, Belapan reported on 21 December. Accord-

ing to the decree, Belarus's GDP is expected to grow by 2-3 percent, industrial production by 2-3 percent, and agricultural production by 8-9 percent, compared with 1999. The population's real incomes are foreseen to grow by 1 percent. [RFE/RL Newsline,21 December, 1999)

BELARUSIAN COMMUNISTS MARK STALIN'S BIRTHDAY — Representatives of the Communist Party of Belarus and veterans' organizations on 21 December laid flowers at the monument commemorating the Soviet victory in World War II to mark the 120th anniversary of the birth of Joseph Stalin, Belapan reported. The ceremony was attended by representatives of the illegal Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania. Belarusian communists told the agency that the place of the ceremony was chosen because of the lack of any monument to the "leader of nations" in Minsk. Earlier this month, left-wing activists in Minsk held "Stalin readings" and a scientific conference on Stalin's "creative heritage," which were attended by Yevgenii Dzhugashvili, the Soviet dictator's grandson.[RFE/RL Newsline,22 December, 1999)

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT REQUIRES TO RAISE, LEVEL OUT WAGES. — Alyaksandr Lukashenka on 22 December demanded that the government "raise wages in the budget sphere, eliminate unfounded differences in work remuneration between branches...and pay wage arrears in the agricultural sector and other branches," Belarusian Television reported. "Why does the manager of an ordinary, wobbly enterprise--which has run into enormous debt to the state and lives on continued preferential treatment--earn more than a cabinet member?" Lukashenka asked his ministers. Having received no satisfying answer, Lukashenka closed the cabinet meeting "earlier than planned," Belarusian Television reported. [RFE/RL Newsline,23 December, 1999)

JAILED BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST HOSPITALIZED — Jailed Belarusian businessman Andrey Klimau, who is also a deputy of the opposition Supreme Soviet, was hospitalized on 22 December, Belapan reported. Klimau was severely beaten by prison guards on 13 December and suffered arm, stomach, and head injuries (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 14 December 1999). The U.S. State Department on 21 December condemned Klimau's beating, saying that it bears witness to the deepening of the political crisis in Belarus and of the country's self-isolation from democratic nations.[RFE/RL Newsline,23 december, 1999)

BELARUSIAN POPULAR FRONT CHANGES NAME. The opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) led by Vintsuk Vyachorka decided on 26 December to change its name to Public Association BNF, RFE/RL's Belarusian Service reported on 27 December. The decision is aimed at bringing the name into line with Belarus's law on public associations, which bans the words "Belarus," "Republic of Belarus," "national," and "popular" from being used in the names of public organizations (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 8 December 1999). BNF activist Yury Khadyka said the BNF had to change its name in order to be permitted to exist legally. He added that the current name allows the BNF to preserve the organization's "10-year tradition." [RFE/RL Newsline,28 December, 1999)

OPPOSITION PARTY ACCUSES 'BELARUSIAN REGIME' OF DISRUPTING DIALOGUE — The United Civic Party (AHP) on 29 December accused the "Belarusian regime" of disrupting the negotiations between the authorities and the opposition, Belapan reported. According to the AHP, the authorities are grossly violating both the OSCE resolution adopted on Belarus in St. Petersburg and point 22 of the OSCE Istanbul summit declaration by imprisoning people for political reasons, failing to investigate the disappearance of prominent opposition politicians, and seeking to adopt electoral legislation without consultations with the opposition. At the same time, the AHP appealed to all democratic opposition parties to work together in 2000. [RFE/RL Newsline,30 December, 1999)

LUKASHENKA: 'MY HEART CANNOT ACCEPT' YELTSIN'S RESIGNATION — In his televised New Year's address on 31 December, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka called Russian President Yeltsin's resignation "a step of a courageous man. My heart cannot accept this political loss for me," he added. Lukashenka said Yeltsin has made a major personal contribution to "the sacrosanct case of the unification of our nations." [RFE/RL Newsline,3 January, 2000)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER WARNS ISRAEL OF 'XENOPHOBIC' LUKASHENKA — Belarusian Popular Front leader Vintsuk Vyachorka sent a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak expressing surprise that Israeli officials have agreed to meet Belarusian President Lukashenka during his 4-7 January visit to attend the Jubilee Year 2000 celebrations, Belapan reported on 31 December. "The Lukashenka regime has revived the institution of state ideology, which is a mixture of communism, xenophobia, and pan-Slavic chauvinism. The practice of anti-Semitism has been restored in Belarus; the branches of the [neo-Nazi] Russian National Unity, which were exported from Russia, feel themselves at ease under the patronage of the regime," Vyachorka wrote. He urged Barak "not to give even a hint that Israel recognizes Lukashenka's antidemocratic, xenophobic regime."[RFE/RL Newsline, 3 January, 2000)

BELARUS TRIMS THREE ZEROS FROM CURRENCY — The Belarusian National Bank on 4 January put into circulation new, revalued Belarusian ruble bills in accordance with a decree by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 21 October 1999). Belarusians will be able to exchange old 1,000 ruble bills for new 1 ruble notes until the end of 2002. The move is intended to build confidence in the national currency and to simplify transactions. However, independent experts argue that the currency change is inadvisable in Belarus's unstable economy, which has an annual inflation rate of more than 200 percent.[RFE/RL Newsline,4 January, 2000)

BELARUS'S LUKASHENKA ACCUSED OF ANTI-SEMITISM — World Association of Belarusian Jewry head Yakov Goodman and Human Rights Center "Vyasna" head Ales Byalatski said in Minsk on 4 January that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is anti-Semitic, AP reported. They also appealed to the Israeli government to avoid official contacts with him during his current trip to Bethlehem. Goodman said the Belarusian government has refused to set up Jewish schools, help maintain Jewish cemeteries and historic monuments, or create memorials to Belarusian Holocaust victims. Goodman expressed "bewilderment" over Lukashenka's planned meetings with Israeli President Ezer Weizman and parliamentary deputies. Goodman recalled that only 28,000 Jews live in Belarus today, compared with 112,000 in 1989. "Jews are voting with their feet against the policy pursued by Alyaksandr Lukashenka," RFE/RL's Belarusian Service quoted him as saying. [RFE/RL Newsline,5 January, 2000)

BELARUSIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS DEMAND LUKASHENKA'S RESIGNATION — More than 20 activists of the Belarusian Human Rights League and the Belarusian Human Rights Association gathered in the reception room of the presidential administration on 5 January to demand Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's resignation, Belapan reported. They signed a petition reminding Lukashenka of his electoral pledge to resign if he failed to

introduce order in the country, stop price hikes, improve living standards, return lost Soviet-era savings, and punish corrupt officials within a year. The petitioners said Lukashenka has failed to meet those promises and said he should follow Boris Yeltsin's example. [RFE/RL Newsline,6 January, 2000]

BELARUSIAN OFFICIAL SAYS PUTIN STRENGTHENING UNION OPPONENTS — Syarhey Posakhau, Belarus's permanent representative to the CIS, on 5 January said acting Russian President Vladimir Putin's first steps as head of state have given rise to concern over the future of the Belarus-Russia Union, Belapan reported. Posakhau said Putin has strengthened the hand of the union's opponents, such as Anatolii Chubais and First Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Aksenenko. Posakhau added that Putin has also slowed down the process of setting up the supranational bodies called for in the union treaty.[RFE/RL Newsline,6 January, 2000]

RIVER FLEET TO PROTECT BELARUSIAN-UKRAINIAN BORDER — Lieutenant General Alyaksandr Paulouski, chairman of the Border Troops Committee, on 6 January said 12 patrol boats will guard the 165-kilometer stretch of the Belarusian-Ukrainian border that runs along the Dnieper and Sozh rivers, Belapan reported. The fleet will be based in Loyeu, Homel Oblast. Paulouski added that Belarus also plans to station patrol boats on the rivers that run alongside its borders with Latvia and Lithuania. [RFE/RL Newsline,7 January, 2000]

MEDIA WATCH

NEWS MEDIA 12

Dissidents Disappear in Belarus (*The New York Times*, "Belarus Sees Its Dissidents Disappearing," October 4, 1999) - The article relates the story about the September 16 disappearance of two dissidents, Viktor Gonchar and Anatoly Krasovsky whose relatives and the opposition claim that "this was the work of the authorities."

There were four disappearances since April but the authorities deny any knowledge of who might be responsible for them. The article reports that the State Department said the United States was greatly concerned by the pattern of disappearances and urged the government to find and protect those who have vanished. "The troubling aspect for those of us who have lived here is that we know that this is a fairly tightly controlled society," the article quotes a U.S. official in Minsk as saying. "To have no information is in part information by itself. The fact the government can't say anything at all about these disappearances is a bit strange."

The article also mentions the other two disappearance, those of Tamara Vinnikava, a former chairwoman of the central bank, and Yuri Zakharenko, former interior minister, and the flight to Lithuania of Syamion Sharetski, speaker of the parliament disbanded by Lukashenko.

The article quotes the first head of state of democratic Belarus, former speaker Stanislav Shushkevich, who said in an interview that the government appeared to have resorted to state terrorism. "The regime," Shushkevich said, "has gone along the path of eliminating the leaders against whom it can't open even an artificial criminal case. This is done with the goal of strengthening the dictatorship." He also said that the West had made the government's task easier by failing to protest vigorously after the first disappearances in April and May. He noted that the government opened a criminal inquiry into Zakharenko's May disappearance only in September, after the United States and Germany had complained about Gonchar's case.

The U. S. Should Be Concerned (*The Washington Post*, editorial, "No Celebration in Istanbul," November 17, 1999) - The editorial states that disappearances of the political opponents Yuri Zakharenko, Viktor Gonchar and Anatoly Krasovski — along with the imprisonment of many other opponents — are reminders that "strongman Alexander Lukashenko is a dangerous descendant of Joseph Stalin " and that the United States should be concerned about it.

The editorial concludes: "In Belarus, any supporter of democracy becomes automatically a dissident and every dissident is in danger from authorities. 'Who will be next?' asks one of the brave ones, Anatoly Lebedko. 'Sometimes we feel safer in jail than out on the streets.' Mr. Lebedko . . . notes that Mr. Lukashenko's brand of totalitarianism is a kind of 'export commodity,' nostalgic Communists and neo-fascists in Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere look to him as a model. Just as during the Cold War, Mr. Clinton and his fellow OSCE leaders in Istanbul must make clear where they stand: with the victims of Russian force and Belarusian oppression, or with the oppressors."

Union Treaty Signing Delayed (*The Washington Post*, "Yeltsin Falls Ill Again, Suddenly Cancels Treaty," November 26, 1999) - The article says that the illness, coming on the eve of the treaty signing, led to some speculation that perhaps Yeltsin was trying to dodge the event. Describing the treaty, the article mentions that the treaty is the latest in a string of efforts--so far largely symbolic--"to bring Russia and Belarus closer to unification. Repeated vows to merge economic ties have not been implemented, but the idea is popular among some nationalists and Communists. One big enthusiast is the president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, whose increasingly authoritarian rule has repelled many Russian liberals. They fear that Lukashenko is seeking unification with Russia to advance his personal ambition of becoming a leading political figure here. Russian liberals also say Belarus has taken none of Russia's difficult steps toward a market economy."

The Land of Terror (*The New York Times*,"Fear Is Creeping Across This Post-Soviet Land," December 17, 1999) - The article reports that in the last 32 months, Anatoly Lebedko, deputy speaker of the disbanded Belarusian parliament, has been tried on criminal charges five times, fined four times, jailed twice and seriously beaten once, on the steps of his apartment. His office phone is tapped. His friends are hectored by the tax police. The state security police ordered his neighbor's 10-year-old son to spy on him, and he returned from a trip to find two subpoenas in his mailbox. 'What's happening here in this small country is underestimated by the U.S.," Mr. Lebedko said . "This regime is supported by elementary fear. This is the legacy of the Soviet Union."

The article tells the stories of other opposition leaders who disappeared, died under suspicious circumstances, fled the country or have been jailed Among those who disappeared: Viktor Gonchar, Lukashenko's former deputy prime minister, later chairman of the State Electoral Commission, joined the opposition and led the opposition-staged shadow presidential election in 1999.; Anatoly Krasovsky, a financial backer of government critics; Yuri Zakharenko, a former interior minister who was politically organizing police officers; and Tamara Vinnikova, a former head of the central bank.

Among those still alive: Andrei Sannikov, leader of the human rights group Charter 97, fled to Geneva; Syemon Sharetsky, speaker of the democratically elected Parliament that Mr. Lukashenko dissolved, fled to Lithuania in July.; Mikhail Chigir, prime minister until he resigned over the referendum, arrested in March, a day after he registered to run in a shadow presidential election; released in the fall; Andrei Klimov, a member of the disbanded parliament who signed a

demand for Lukashenko's impeachment, has been in jail since February 1998.

The article states: "Never exactly a beacon of freedom, Belarus is increasingly the scene of strange and terrible happenings. . . . Disappearances and death threats are new elements in post-Soviet Belarussian politics. They have further winnowed an already small democracy movement and sent a chill through what opposition remains. More than that, they may have forever remade the image of the country's leader, Aleksandr Lukashenko, long regarded as just a goofy autocrat. Stories abound of his obsession with sports, his off-color speeches and other quirky behavior, but now he is quickly earning a reputation as a ruthless dictator."

According to the article, some independent groups say the situation in Belarus has worsened sharply since last winter, when Mr. Lukashenko's critics began organizing surprisingly vigorous protests. "The government crackdown on independent media, civil society and political activity has become more systematic and violent," said a report issued in April by the East-West Institute, a New York-based group promoting democracy in former Soviet-bloc nations. "The public mood in Belarus is characterized by an insidious and deepening fear as well as the widespread belief that little can be done to change the situation."

The article concludes: "The president's seemingly casual attitude toward his opponents' troubles has come at a price. At the recent summit meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Mr. Lukashenko was ostracized by Western leaders. An inventive man, though, he found a way around that. As leaders strolled to a meal one day, he ambushed President Clinton long enough to assert later that they had a weighty discussion and that he had even invited Mr. Clinton to visit Belarus. 'I told him a joke,' Mr. Lukashenko recalled later. 'If you cannot' visit Belarus 'before the end of your term, then all you will have to do is extend it.' "

A Report on the Freedom March (Prague weekly *Respekt*, "Silent Aftermath of the Freedom March," October 25, 1999)

— The largest demonstration Minsk has seen in over three years was billed by the opposition organizers as "The March for Freedom". It took place on 17 October and may well prove to be the watershed event in the final decline of President Alyaksanr Lukashenka's authoritarian regime.

Unification of the Opposition

After years of mutual hostility and distrust, Belarus' splintered opposition finally found a common rallying point in the March for Freedom. All opposition forces — from independent labor unions to civic/human rights organizations (like Charter '97 and Spring '96) to various political parties (BPF, Social-Democrats, United Civic Party etc.) — were galvanized by the event. United by a common goal, the opposition managed to coax an estimated 20,000 demonstrators onto the streets of Minsk, a number not seen in the capital since the protests of 1996.



A peaceful crowd marched ...

Yet it was not the demonstration itself but rather the government's brutal response to it which may well render the Freedom March the catalyst for the end of Lukashenka's dictatorship.



Carrying posters ...

The government's special riot forces (OMON) did everything they could to provoke the demonstrators. They would pluck their victims — often elderly men and sometimes women — out of the crowd and proceed to beat them before dragging them off into crowded, unheated police vans. Demonstrators endeavored to protect their compatriots by hurling stones at the militia, only to be pummeled by stones in response.Some demonstrators were forced to escape police truncheons by plunging into the icy waters of the Śvisłač river, which flows through the capital's center.

Ultimately, the OMON were successful in dispersing the crowd — but the retribution did not stop there. The Belarus secret service, still known as the KGB, immediately initiated a wave of arrests as demonstrators were making their way back to their homes. Many of those taken into custody never even took part in clashes with the militia.



Clash with militia

Scenes of brutality and humiliation ensued. Those detained were beaten either on the scene or upon arrival at police precincts. Young girls were reportedly forced to kneel in rows with their hands and heads placed on the ground while booted militiamen trod over their backs. Many of the girls reported being harassed and even threatened sexually by police officers.

While being held in police custody for as long as 24 hours, many of those nabbed said they were denied food and ater and the right to use bathroom facilities. Calls to relatives or legal counsel were also reportedly denied — a clear violation of Belarusian law.

"Just shouting"

The subsequent court trials amounted to little more than farces. They were conducted in tiny offices in the presence of the accused, some witnesses, the judge, a recording clerk and, in some cases, an attorney. Many of the defendants, of course, had no counsel as they were denied the right to contact kin or legal representatives. Witnesses for the prosecution were invariably a pair of KGB agents.

The trial of 21-year-old Natalia M. is representative of many others. When the judge asked the defendantt why she was there, a KGB agent replied in her stead: "She was shouting 'Long Live Belarus!' " "Anything else?" asked the judge. "She was just shouting," came the response. Later, Natalia asked the agent/witness when the report on the basis of which was actually prepared by him. "Oh, about 10:00 P.M." responded the KGB man. Natalia, however, had been arrested five hours earlier, a discrepancy in time confirmed by another witness. Despite this, Natalia was not released and was forced to stand trial.

We experienced it too ...

Lukashenka's flagrant disregard for his own country's laws will surely come back to haunt him, as the patience of many hitherto apathetic Belarusians has long been exceeded. Now it is up to opposition to strike while the iron is hot and take advantage of the people's frustration.

The opposition cannot, however, accomplish this alone; it urgently requires the support of the international democratic community. Lukashenka's repeated abuse of power and violation of basic human rights must be met with swift condemnation from western governments. More direct intervention from the West is also needed. For example, many Belarusian mothers are appealing to Czech journalists to attend the trials of their children in hopes that the presence of foreigners may put pressure on Lukashenka's judges to impose lighter, fairer sentences.

The Belarusian people themselves regard the Czech Republic as a kindred state, closely related in language and common traditions. The first Belarusian-language Bible, for instance, was published in Prague, in 1517, by Francisak Skaryna. Skaryna's Bible introduced many Czech-language elements into vernacular Belarusian. Further, during the era of the first Czechoslovak republic, the Belarusian government-in-exile and many of its leaders were based in Prague.

Until recently, moreover, the Czech people, like Belarusians today, were forced to live under a dictatorial regime.

They escaped this fate less due to their own courage than to luck and outside assistance. ... Unfortunately, while diplomatic representatives of many democratic countries are coming to the aid of the Belarusian opposition, there is nary a Czech among them ...

The author of this report, Martin Vanek, is a member of the Czech TV foundation "People in Need."

Time-Warp Belarus (*International Herald Tribune*, "A Reign of Terror in Time-Warp Belarus," October 20, 1999)

.... Coming to Belarus is like going through a time warp to the old Soviet Union. The state is omnipresent and controlling. In the best hotels, where foreigners stay, policemen stand by the elevators in the lobby, watching who gets on and off.

The Belarus ruble is suffering hyperinflation that is making it practically worthless. The average income in Belarus has fallen to $30 a month. Food shortages are widespread and common, but Mr. Lukashenko tells the people that the shortages are the result of their eating too much.

The official exchange rate, which was 50,000 rubles to the dollar less than a year ago, was 330,000 to the dollar last week. But the unofficial, black market rate was 540,000 to the dollar Oct. 11 and has fallen to 600,000 to the dollar by Saturday. My hotel bill for a week was 204 million rubles.

Meantime, the people of Belarus look with envy and dismay at their neighbors who have embraced liberal democracy and a free-market economy and are doing well. Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, about 160 kilometers (100 miles) away, is a thriving, vibrant city in stark contrast to the gray and tired Minsk, which was almost completely destroyed during World War II and was then rebuilt in grand Soviet style, with wide boulevards and masive, hulking, nondescript buildings.

"Why are our people living as they are when their neighbors are doing so much better?" asked a prominent journalist.

Mr. Lukashenko, 45, who had been a Communist functionary during what is called "the Soviet time," became Belarus' first elected president in 1994. His five-year term would have ended last July. But in 1996, after a rigged referendum, he disbanded the elected parliament and declared that his term of office would start on that date, thereby giving himself an extra two years by fiat. Now he seeks to unite with Russia, and he dreams of becoming head of the combined union.

On Sunday morning, the militia were out in force throughout the city. When thousands of people began their march, the militia clashed with them, and dozens were injured.

"It's getting worse," the journalist said. "People are beginning to disappear. Newspapers are being shut down. The economy is in shambles. The president is illegitimate."

LETTERS

U. K. Position on Russia-Belarus Union

Thank you for your letter of 13 October to the Prime Minister enclosing a copy of the autumn edition of *Belarusian Review* and focusing on the expiration of Lukashenko's term of office and the proposed Russia-Belarus Union. As the Desk Officer dealing with Belarus I have been asked to reply.

First, as I am sure you are aware, the European Union issued a Declaration on 20 July making clear its view that President Lukashenko's mandate under the 1994 constitution expired on that day.

We have examined the draft of the Russia-Belarus Union treaty in detail. The main thrust of the treaty is economic but it also encompasses coordination of foreign and defence policy. The draft Treaty states that it safeguards Belarusian and Russian sovereignty.

Countries are of course free to choose their own alliances but such arrangements will only command international respect if they are democratically endorsed.

Finally, you mention the Memorandum of Security Assurances of 1994, of which the U.K. was a signatory. The U.K's commitment under this Memorandum is to respect the independence and sovereignty of Belarus. That commitment was given on the basis that Belarus would remain a Sovereign State. The current draft Union Treaty states that it safeguards the sovereignty of both countries.

Helen M. Arbon
Eastern Department
Foreign & Commonwealth Office
London, United Kingdom

Intolerable Situation in Belarus

The insid ious event of December 8, 1999 has shown the world that most nations will merely stand by twiddling their thumbs while an independent nation is subjected to an absorption process by a large nation bent on resurrecting its expansionist tendencies of the past. But the most apalling consequence of this sad event — the "union" of Belarus with Russia — to be thus "united" with its imperialistic-minded eastern neighbor, is that it is an open invitation for other, similar *anschluss* takeovers to take place, because the world community permits such an event to occur.

Your editorial in the fall issue of *Belarusian Review* did indeed seek to provide appropriate steps to be taken by Washington to prevent such a takeover. But despite all diplomatic assurances, such as the 1994 U.S.-Great Britain-Russia-Belarus Memorandum providing a "guarantee" of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity to Belarus — all seemed to have been in vain. Due to the whim of a person of dictatorial ways who has remained in his presidential office illegally after the expiration of his term, the so-called union occurred and is no more nor less an *anschluss* á la Third Reich era, minus the actual marching in of the troops, which, of course, in our current times is no longer needed for show.

In a country where mysterious deaths of political opposition figures seem to be part of daily life, repression of the press and of free market activity is rampant, and a virtual return to Soviet-style intimidation of the citizens of Belarus is practiced, there is naturally a growing discontent and dissatisfaction among the population. The alarming economic situation and instability of currency is only fueling the situation. This has brought about a drastic drop in Lukashenka's popularity rating. (Remember ? His entire campaign was based on a populist, man-of-the-people notion. Soon enough, the people of Belarus found out otherwise.) As a consequence, Mr. Lukashenka, according to some media sources, is planning to declare early presidential elections to "meet the wishes of the electorate," but in effect to reinforce his position and ensure continued presidency for himself while he is still in the lead — having no effectual in-country opposition.

The above mentioned factors, and a growing pressure of political exiles and the underground opposition may be able to eventually contribute to the dictator's demise. A vivid example of persecution was recently provided by Ms. Tamara Vinnikova, the National Bank of Belarus head who has disappeared in April of 1997, now has resurfaced in London and has exposed activities of the State Secretary for Security, Viktar Sheyman, and the nefarious treatment of political prisoners by the country's secret police.

It is the opposition abroad and within the country that is now accelerating its activities and is forcing the word community to take note of the intolerable situation in Belarus. But it is both the pressures on Lukashenka and on Putin, the emerging Russian leader in the post-Yeltsin era, which have to be kept up to free Belarus of its ties to Russia.

You have rightly noted in your fall issue of *BR* that "Belarus [is] serving as the first link in this chain" of Russia's goal to pursue the restoration of its lost empire. It would be highly undesirable for all concerned to have another Chechnya on the Western front of Russia , yet there are some indications already that there are such forces in store in Belarus. They are only lacking material and moral support from the outside, but the wooded areas of the country are ideally suited for partisan warfare, as WWII and anti-Bolshevik warfare has shown in the past. Let us hope it will not have to come to this and that we would limit ourselves with means of diplomacy to free Belarus of its shackles.

Throughout its history, Belarus has endured much: invasions by the Poles, Russians, Germans, nuclear fallout, economic and ethnic culture deprivation. So let us hope that the world community in the year 2000 will stop twiddling its thumbs and take note of this additional plight of Belarus: its national obliteration!

Kastus Hneuny
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BR — Important Resource About Belarus

Just received my copy of the *Belarusian Review* fall issue. What a great collection of articles and analyses about Belarus as well as letters from readers!

In my humble opinion, the *Belarusian Review* is one of the most important resources about Belarus in English. Even though I use the Internet for keeping current about late-breaking, timely news about Belarus (as well as to keep up with the wealth of cultural, linguistic etc. Web-based information), printed periodicals such as the *Belarusian Review* are still very, very important for providing news and analysis in a compact and convenient form. There is nothing else like it in English.

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